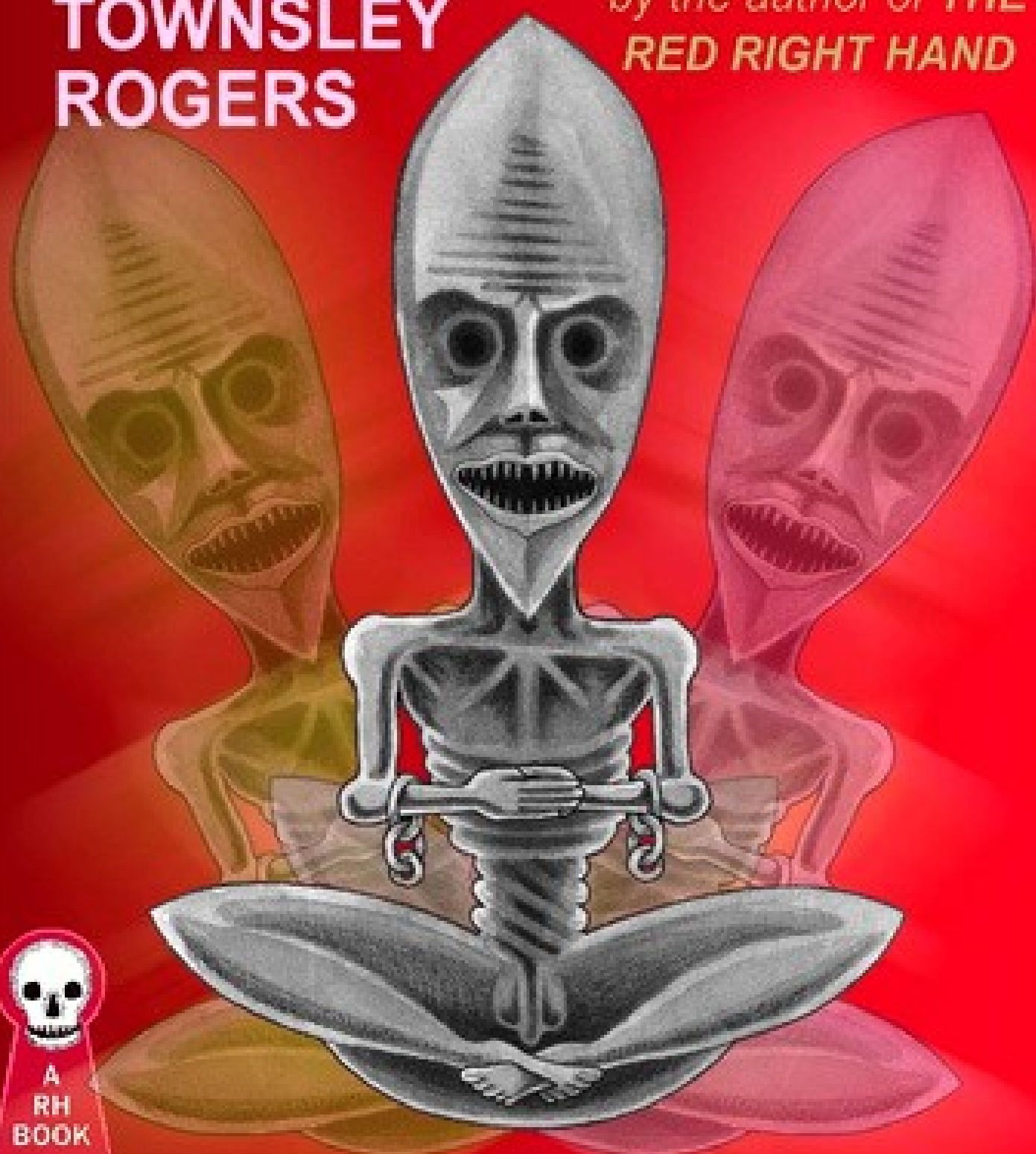


# NIGHT OF HORROR

JOEL  
TOWNSLEY  
ROGERS

& OTHER STORIES

*by the author of THE  
RED RIGHT HAND*







*Here's what a couple of the most hip writers of our time have to say about the book you hold in your hands....*

What a treat! Twenty-plus years after Joel Townsley Rogers' death, here is the first collection of his shorter works — and it's a beauty! Seven stories, mostly criminous, and it's hard to choose a favorite. I'm inclined toward "The Murder Plot" (1949), describing the fatal encounter of two writers, both of them, I imagine, representing two sides of Rogers' own personality. There's George Gribby, "a cent-a-word freelance writer of highly fantastic mystery stories," and muscular, well-developed Evans Dodd, he of the quiet but swank address, "one of the most spectacularly successful of the younger murder novelists." But then there's "Pink Diamonds" (1941), a surprising venture into ultra-hardboiled territory, a shocker that keeps on shocking.

Rogers wrote westerns, science fiction, mysteries, air adventures. He wrote for the biggest of the slicks and the humblest of the pulps. Please, Ramble House, please give us more collections of these marvelous yarns. Number One on my wish list — I'll send a letter to Santa this year, I promise! — would be "Enter Captain Death" (1932), a four-parter from *Short Stories*. Or maybe "Blood on the Moon" (1929) from *Air Stories*, or "The Eel Walks" (1935), a two-parter from *Detective Fiction Weekly*.

There's such a wealth of mouth-watering stuff here, we could fill a five-foot shelf and never exhaust the treasure trove.

Richard A. Lupoff

NIGHT OF HORROR is packed with fast-moving stories and surprising twists, told with flamboyant style. They don't write 'em like that anymore, and it's great to have Joel Townsley Rogers back in print. Barry Warren's fine introduction is just the icing on the cake.

Bill Crider



# **NIGHT OF HORROR**



# **NIGHT OF HORROR**

**A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION**

**BY**

***JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS***

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY**

***Barry Warren***

**RAMBLE HOUSE**



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## **NIGHT OF HORROR**

### **A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION BY JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS**

*Introduction by Barry Warren*

Joel Townsley Rogers is one of those authors fated to be remembered and praised for a single work: in his case, the one-of-a-kind surrealistic nightmare novel *The Red Right Hand* (1945). Readers sufficiently excited by their encounter with this deservedly legendary work of imagination may have undertaken the nearly impossible quest to track down copies of his other three novels: *Once in a Red Moon* (1923); *The Lady with the Dice* (1946); and *The Stopped Clock* (1958), cheap paperback copies of which occasionally surface (in a mutilated abridged version) as *Never Leave My Bed* (1963). (Sadly, *The Lady with the Dice*, issued only in a flimsy paper Handibook edition, was also abridged by its publisher—without Rogers' participation—from 90,000 to 50,000 words, and the original full-length manuscript destroyed or lost.)

What even these Rogers fans may not realize is that this author with the outré style and imagination left behind a legacy of (literally) countless other works. For he was one of that unsung legion in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who scrounged a living by churning out an endless succession of stories for magazines—in his case, mostly pulp detective, futuristic science fiction, and men's soldier-of-fortune or aviation tales, with rare forays into such respectable forums as *Harper's* and *Saturday Evening Post*. But unless you're the sort of driven collector willing to spend hours in graveyard bookstores sifting through piles of moldy, disintegrating *New Detective*, *Argosy*, and *True Crime* magazines (the kind with lurid cover illustrations of strangler's hands menacing a screaming dame in a lowcut emerald dress, or a tong lord poised to plunge his dagger into a dapper hero just as he pries open a casket overflowing with faceted diamonds and rubies and gleaming gold coins), you're not likely to

have encountered any of the prolific Rogers' magazine fiction.

This collection at last makes available several examples of this versatile writer's cleverly plotted and atmospherically evocative crime stories. It does not claim to be a "best of" collection, since probably no reader alive today has had a chance to become familiar with Rogers' entire creative output. Faced with the challenge of describing what's so good about these tales without depriving other readers of the frisson of discovery, I've tried to limit these introductory remarks to pointing out some of the qualities they share in common as emanations from a single creative imagination, hopefully avoiding the temptation to become too specific about the very details of plot or structure that make each of the stories uniquely effective.

The title piece, "Night of Horror," might be more properly placed in a collection of Roger's fantasy and science fiction—if such a collection should some day be published. But its precise yet disquieting descriptions of rural twilight, and the exquisite modulation of its gradual slide into nightmare, set the tone and make it an effective companion to the other tales in this volume. Interestingly, its style is perhaps the most "realistic" of these tales, devoid of the poetic hyperbole and garish humor that characterize much of Rogers' writing, making the intrusion of the fantastic all the more terrifying. Just as disturbing is the more subtle suggestion that the comfortably domestic parents seem nearly as fearful of the strange son with the special qualities that has been visited upon them.

"The Murderer" stands out for its cool consistency of tone and carefully rendered visual style—a montage of Edward Hopper paintings of the Southern rural countryside (the truckstop diner, the washtub on the porch, the bridge outside of town where, one realizes with a shiver, starved souls might well be driven by desperation to trade furtive sex for nylons), all leading to a moment of truth in the cold grey dawn. (Of this story, Joel's son Tom Rogers—also a writer—comments, "*The Murderer*" was one of [his] most commercially successful stories. It was widely anthologized and translated after its Post appearance, and it also came out as a radio drama and as a television presentation, I believe—back in the 1950s before we had a television—on the show "Lights Out." We

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*got to see it on the tv in the basement of our neighbors the Reesides. It was also presented on South African radio or television.)* The delightful revelation—found in a television reference book—that musical effects for the “Lights Out” dramatizations (1949-1952) were provided by theremin, organ, and harp should already be making the hairs stand up on the back of your neck!

In fact, the tight unity of time, place, and action, the slightly macabre emotional tone, and the highly visual elements that characterize all of the stories in this collection would have made any of them ideal candidates for 30-minute episodes on the 50s’ “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” tv series. Like that memorable show, these stories feature gradually mounting suspense, characters that you can easily see being portrayed by distinctive character actors (they had faces then!), and a sudden unexpected twist at the last moment, delivered with a sardonic humor that leaves a shiver of creepiness.

Consider “The Little Doll Says Die!” The point-of-view character, Herbert Creedy (Hitchcock might have cast Tom Ewell in the role) lacks the creative powers to be a playwright, but uses his sterile intellect as a “play doctor” to identify and fix the weaknesses in other writers’ plots. Rogers doles out telling details in such a way that we begin to understand things before Creedy does, lending a particularly ghastly irony and tension to the discussion between him and sweating George Sutts about how to solve the difficulties of a particular murder mystery plot that young Sutts is currently creating. Even after Creedy suddenly fits all the pieces together to grasp what is going on and races up the stairs of the desolate Breakers Inn, he—and we—will encounter a surprise that reverses everything, including his own part in the murder mystery’s unfolding plot.

A failed writer is also the central character of “The Murder Plot,” and the object of his poisonous resentment no less than a highly successful rival short story writer. The conflict plays out in real time in the successful writer’s apartment, the sort that only exists as a studio set in tv shows of the era. Their tense encounter and conversation is ostensibly about the craft of writing, though it’s apparent that there is a deeper, more dangerous antagonism between the two. (It is worth remarking that, of the sto-

ries in this collection, not only "The Little Doll Says Die!" and "The Murder Plot," but also "Two Deaths Have I" and "The Hanging Rope" feature writers as central characters. This has the effect of diverting some of the sophisticated reader's attention from the raw content of the stories to an appreciation that a clever author somewhere in the wings is devising the situations and controlling our responses through his narrative style and the care with which he reveals telling details.) Again, the story ends with a typically ironic twist upon our expectations. But read those last few words of the abrupt ending again: Just how many twists have taken place?

A writer—this time for radio plays based on stories from a true crime magazine—is also the protagonist-narrator of "Two Deaths Have I". When scriptwriter Beaman Young is assigned to turn this week's prize-winning entry into a thirty-minute radio play, little does the authoress of the presumably fictional "true crime" magazine story suspect that Young not only witnessed the actual crime many years ago when he was a naïve teenager, but in reading and recalling those incidents now comes to a different realization of what took place out there on remote Big Moose Lake in northern Maine. His more mature understanding of human passions guides his pen to reinterpret the details and rewrite the plot to fit a different hypothesis. The ticking-clock script rewrite and showdown in the broadcast studio are enjoyable hokum, and a winking Rogers knows it, but, oh those chilly descriptions of the deserted lake resort and its out-of-season visitors . . .

An analogous problem faces ex-policeman Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, the central character of "The Hanging Rope": Faced with a seemingly airtight locked-room murder mystery, he struggles continually in his mind to come up with some plausible hypothesis that would fit the known facts and make the tale's two impossible homicides possible. This cleverly-constructed story rewards a second reading in order to see the art with which Rogers limits our point of view and uses a magician's misdirection to distract our eyes from the truth. He reminds us again of his own god-like presence as creator and puller of strings by cutting away periodically to a character who is a writer. And, while not a participant in the evening's bloody events, not present in the same building, and not

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even an ear- or eye-witness, the writer nevertheless plays a crucial role in understanding and solving the puzzle. While not as creepy as Rogers' masterpiece, *The Red Right Hand*, this novella-length tale shares with that work a relentless accumulation of dovetailing coincidences that creates its own self-contained world, simultaneously absurd and nightmarish.

"The Pink Diamonds" is yet another offbeat crime tale that would have been right at home on "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." There is no writer character standing in for Rogers this time, but, like "The Hanging Rope," it makes effective use of shifting points of view. The opening jewel heist and shootout in a New York department store are narrated by an unsettlingly tentative omniscient voice. Succeeding scenes focus on solitary characters whose paths cross that day thanks to typically Rogers-like coincidences. When pure evil eventually intrudes into the pathetic and lonely young housewife's world, however, the gradualness with which it makes itself known to her and us is surprisingly chilling.

What are the distinctive qualities of Rogers' writings? First of all, there's his style, marked by an infusion of deliberately "poetic" vocabulary and syntax that gives a decidedly surreal or fairytale effect to what may be an otherwise mundane or sordid subject. (Rogers gave full indulgence to, and fortunately managed to exorcise the worst excesses of, this poeticizing tendency in his first novel, *Once in a Red Moon*, creating a dense, bizarre oddity that would leave even readers comfortable with *Finnegan's Wake* scratching their heads while searching frantically through their unabridged OEDs.) His style is also marked by the introduction of humor into otherwise tense or nightmarish situations, imbuing the narrative with a grotesque quality. He likes to create larger-than-life archetypal characters that take on mythic proportions; this is especially evident and effective in the four novels, but remnants of this tendency are apparent in a few of the short works in this collection, particularly "The Hanging Rope" and "The Little Doll Says Die!" It's worth noting, too, that, with a few exceptions (most notably "The Hanging Rope"), Rogers generally avoids the cityscapes and venetian-blinded interiors typical of noir writing of the period, and instead places his stories in natural outdoor set-



tings to create mood and atmosphere. Just reflect upon how important the settings are to "The Murderer", "Two Deaths Have I" and "Night of Horrors" in this collection, not to mention all of his novels.

It is likely that Joel Townsley Roger's reputation will always rest upon his supreme accomplishment, *The Red Right Hand*, and that is perhaps sufficient and just. But on the strength of these long-lost stories and his other three scarce novels, at last within the reach of more readers through the efforts of Ramble House, a reassessment of his talents might place him just behind—and at times neck-and-neck with—such respected writers as Cornell Woolrich, Fredric Brown, or James M. Cain. Not a bad place to be, really.

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# **NIGHT OF HORROR**



## NIGHT OF HORROR

A PLANE WAS going across the big orange hunter's moon ahead when I turned off on Goodhaven Road, no more than a couple of miles from Irene and Danny at home.

One of the Southern Cross Airways' two regular evening ships, I recognized it, heading up for New York from Buenos Aires or Valparaiso at six hundred to seven hundred miles an hour. It was quite high and four or five miles away. They always flew the same course almost exactly to the quarter mile, and on schedule almost to the minute; although it was after ten o'clock now, which made it a little late.

I've never been any farther from the Eastern Shore than Wilmington and Philadelphia myself. But my father had been in the Navy Air, back in World War II. He had been killed in Brazil, in one of the old piston-engine planes of that day, when I was even younger than Danny was now. I could just barely remember him, his last time home, I guess, singing a song to me—something about two ships, the *Don* and the *Magdalena*, that sailed to Brazil. It was something that Kipling had written, it seemed. The two giant S.C.A. intercontinentals were named the *Don* and the *Magdalena*, after the ships in that old song, though which one this was I didn't know.

A speck of tiny cloud seemed to break off from one of its wings in the moonlight as I watched it through my station-wagon windshield. It drifted on the high night wind in this direction, while the big plane went on. Something like a parachute, though it couldn't have been that, of course. I lost it after a couple of moments in the cobweb threads of the starry October night.

It showed how old-fashioned I was that I thought at times in words like that, I checked myself as I drove along. The long thin streaks that sometimes drift across the stars, like a few tonight, aren't really anything like cobwebs, but just molecules of water vapor loosely strung together, as anybody knows. There aren't any cobwebs in the sky, and never were, except for the tiny spiders that used to float off on their little threads when their egg pods burst; and they were never very high. Childhood im-

ages and ideas still stick with us, though, long after we have learned that they are completely false, and pop up from our subconscious without our realizing it. Idols of the cave, old Francis Bacon called them.

There weren't any cobwebs anywhere any more, when I got down to it. The last of them had gone eight or ten years ago, soon after the insects that they had been built to catch. If I should read Danny the Mother Goose rhyme about the old lady who went to sweep the cobwebs off the moon, it would have no associations for him at all. No memories, when he grew up, of lacy nets spread out on the grass in summer dawns, looking like patches of frost with the dew on them, which a barefoot boy was careful to avoid; nor of the geometrically perfect webs of black-and-yellow argiopid spiders strung from bush to bush in backyard gardens, with their four rays of laddered silk, and of gathering around one with a gang of other kids, thrusting out a long branch to tear the sticky threads, then running frantically in all directions, in terror that the tiger-striped demon of the web was after them. No memories of dusty hay barns, with cobwebs festooned down from the rafters and hanging in thick triangular sheets in the corners, where dark bloated bodies crouched in the depths of their tunnels, waiting to leap upon their prey. And I was glad he wouldn't.

Once when I had been about five myself I had gone into Grandfather Prettyman's barn at dusk, hunting for eggs which some of his wandering hens might have laid in the hay, and one of those festoons had dropped down on me, as big as a pillowcase. I would never forget stumbling and fighting my way out through the wide doorway, stifled with horror, clawing the sticky hay-wisped sheet from my eyelids and lips and hair. Even today, it was all I could do to go beneath a tree hanging with Spanish moss.

Coming that way from far-off lands and skies full of different stars, the airliner made me think of the garbled report from Brazil that had been on the kitchen radio early this morning, while I was trying a couple of shells from my new box in my shotgun, waiting for the coffee to perk, with Irene still getting Danny dressed upstairs.

It had been about a town called Iniquilios, up a tributary of the Amazon from Manaus. A small city of about four thousand people, rubber hunters, tannery workers and

rivermen, Indian and white, with electricity and telephones and a radio station, which had been inexplicably cut off from communication. A plane had been sent from Manaus to investigate, with a network correspondent aboard who had phoned back a report, relayed on the radio hookup, about the town being all hidden beneath a silvery gray carpet.

His broadcast hadn't been very intelligible, fading out and getting mixed with other things; and maybe after half a minute he had been cut off with an apology by the network commentator for the poor quality of the signal. The commentator had gone on to explain that the town was apparently hidden in morning river mist, although the reporter might have meant that it had been submerged in a flood; and they would try to have a full account later. There had been a report from Washington then about the Mars rocket, followed by a car dealer's spiel and the weather forecast. But the Manaus correspondent's thin voice had sounded excited, almost hysterical, and I wished there had been a little more of his story. My car radio was out of commission, and I hadn't seen a newspaper all day, over at Rehoboth, Delaware, repairing the roof of the judge's beach house after Hurricane Claribel. Three hours up, and the same back, with more than ten hours of steady shingle-patching and tarring in between, wanting to get the job finished in one day.

Lights shone from the windows of the houses scattered along the road. There is something about the lights of houses in an autumn night in the country—with the day's work done and the school-age kids doing their lessons around the dining table, the little ones in bed—that is snug and homey. It makes you glad you belong to the human race, and live in a civilized age and country. Cave-men had their damp rock dens to cower in from the sabertooth, it might be, and other animals have their nests or lairs. But there is nothing like a modern man's own safe, warm, lighted home when night has come and the weather is turning cool.

The Kings' weather-beaten shingle cottage across the road from our place was all dark inside, though. Their gooseneck floodlight was on above the open doors of their old garage-shed beside the house, and their car was out. A five-gallon gasoline can was standing against one of the

doors—with a potato stuck on its spout instead of a lost cap—that Lem King had brought home for their kitchen stove and been too lazy to take in. The light shone inside the shed on the oil-soaked floor, a tangle of tire chains, old gunny sacks, and the big smoked ham they had won at the raffle last week, all hanging from the center rafter. It shone on a jumble of old boxes, broken chairs, a busted baby carriage and worn-out tires piled up at the back; and over their pitted driveway and weedy lawn and broken-down picket fence in front.

Lem was a lazy mechanic, and his wife a slattern housekeeper. Irene and I, between ourselves, referred to their house as “the Kings’ palace.” There wasn’t any need of any human beings letting a place get all run down like that. But maybe there are individuals and families of every zoological class that are just naturally attracted to dirt and disorder and prefer it.

Their little Nancy’s window up in the attic dormer was open, I saw. They had put her to bed, and left her alone again while they went out to have themselves another ball down at the Four Corners bar. The way they neglected her was a crime. She wasn’t any older than Danny. Only an ordinary kid, it might be, with an ordinary hundred to hundred and twenty IQ, but pretty as anything, with curly light brown hair and big pansy eyes and the sweetest smile. Irene thought they probably beat her, from the bruises she sometimes had, but we didn’t know. We had never heard her cry.

There wasn’t anything that could happen to her, of course. She wasn’t the kind of kid who plays with matches. There weren’t any burglars or child molesters anywhere in the county, like maybe in a city. No bear or panther was going to climb in and get her; the only wild animals we had were squirrels and rabbits, raccoons and skunks and a few possums, and maybe a deer or two over in Barnes’ woods.

Still, a five-year-old kid oughtn’t to be left alone in a house at night, no matter how safe. Maybe they wake up and see something stirring just outside the window, like a vine or tree branch, and they don’t know what it is. Or they hear a little sound, like a stair tread that gives a creak with a change of temperature, or a water faucet

dripping, and they think it's something creeping to get them, making bubbles with its breath.

I swung in our driveway and parked in front of the garage. I took my lunch box from the seat beside me as I got out. I left my ladders and stuff in the back of the wagon, having another roof job tomorrow over in Griffinsville.

Light from the downstairs windows shone out on the flagstones to the kitchen door. Danny's window upstairs in front was dark, I saw, and open a couple of inches from the bottom. His bedtime was nine o'clock, and Irene always kept him to a strict schedule. She was college-educated, with a major in child psychology, and she thought it was even more important for him than for an ordinary kid to have everything just so. Though, as she had to admit herself, even the smartest professors didn't know about kids like him, and there was nothing to guide us.

From just above the fringes of my eyebrows, as I was glancing up, I caught the movement of something dropping down on the roof overhead, it looked like, out of the night sky. Just a kind of sprawling shadow, blotting out the stars over the house an instant. I stopped a couple of paces from the kitchen stoop, lifting my eyes straight up to where the roof ridge and the square center chimney cut the sky.

A little pale smoke was coming up out of the chimney mouth from the oil furnace. That could have been what had caught my eye. Or it might have been a fall of leaves from the old hundred-foot oak, in front, that went back before the Revolution, and maybe before Columbus, that was called the Lord Protector Oak, though nobody knew why. It shed an awful lot of leaves. Lem King even complained that they sometimes fell across the road onto his own roof. Two or three times every fall I had to put a ladder up and clean them out of our gutters. There was a bunch of them on the roof now, so far as I could tell, in a flat pile humped up against the chimney.

I turned the knob of the kitchen door and went in. "Hi, Irene!" I called out as I closed it behind me.

The kitchen was filled with the smell of cooked Concord grapes. A couple of big pots with rims of pink froth were on the sink drainboard, with a colander full of seeds and



grapeskins and a purple-stained cheesecloth straining bag. There was an empty pan lined with paraffin for the tops of jelly glasses. She must have made a raft of it today. Every fall she filled the shelves of the big preserve closet down in the basement with all kinds of things she put up.

Some man was talking on the TV in the living room, kind of low. I took off my jacket and hat, hanging them on the hook on the back of the basement door, which was standing part-way open.

"Irene?" I called down the stairs.

But it was dark down there. She had taken her jelly glasses down, but had neglected to bolt the door again when she came back up, it looked like. It was likely to swing open that way unless you did. I closed it and threw the bolt.

She couldn't be watching a program so hard that she hadn't heard me. She was probably upstairs looking at Danny's thermometer by the light from the hall, deciding whether she ought to open his window another inch or close it another inch, I figured, and would be down directly.

She had set out a plate and knife and fork on the table for me, with my napkin. I opened the oven door and saw a casserole that she had put back to keep warm. I set it out on the table and got some butter and homemade bread and poured a big glass of milk. I thought I might as well get the evening paper to look at while I was eating.

On the window ledge, between the geranium pots, I caught sight of my box of shotgun shells that I had laid there this morning; and my gun still standing against the wall that I had got out from the closet under the front stairs. Irene was always petrified of guns. I was going to have an awful argument when Danny was old enough to go hunting with me.

I picked up the shells and gun to put away, and went into the living room with them. The evening paper was lying on the couch. On the TV screen a man with owlish glasses was sitting talking at a table.

"Two major mutations in one species, doctor?" I heard him say. "A great increase in size, and an even more tremendous increase in intelligence?"

They were having another one of these discussion programs, it looked like, about biology and the changes they figured were due to radiation, like they had been having for the past ten years, ever since the insects began not having eyes and died out over all the world. I sat down on the arm of the couch a minute to see if they would say anything new about the kids like Danny.

"We are very far from having any adequate data yet on the variety and extent of mutations during the past decade, doctor," a man with big ears and a bald, domelike head said, leaning on his elbows. "We can only assume that nothing is impossible in the forms that life may take. It is conceivable that mutations of one sort or another, meaningful or meaningless, infinitesimal or staggering in their proportions, beneficial or destructive to the species, may have occurred by the scores of thousands among various families and orders of all the great phyla of animals. In the ocean deeps, in the unknown jungles—"

"The human mutation is the most significant to us as men, don't you think, doctor?" someone else said.

A man with a beard, wearing a clerical collar, was on the screen. "The extraordinary increase in intellectual capacity of so many of our recent children, I mean," he said. "Seven- and even five-year-olds who think in terms of quantum variables and elementary particles, so far as their thought processes can be assayed, and are endowed with extrasensory perceptions for which we have no name. I believe that zoology regards them as a true mutation, pointing to the establishment, within the comparatively brief span of another six or ten generations, of a race of super-homo as far advanced over modern man as he is over the shaggy clam digger of the kitchen middens, or perhaps *Austroanthropos*."

Danny, I thought, and the others like him. He would live in a world beyond all my understanding, beyond imagination. He would be tall and shining, wonderfully clear in his thinking, a million years farther from all the scars of old dark terrors, all the idols of the cave. I would be only a flat-skulled gibbering club wielder to him, an ignorant thing of the night and the forests, who strangely had fathered him. But on me, because of him, the glory of that future world shone in a thin crack through the door.

"Quite, doctor," the big bald man was saying. "Unquestionably an incalculable intellectual leap has occurred in a proportion of the offspring of our species, increasing at a geometric rate each year. The first primitive human intelligence itself, which according to the best evidence developed suddenly in various scattered groups of small-brained, insect-eating, lemurlike mammals hunted as prey by the great Saurian carnivores, in all likelihood was such a mutation, occurring in an era of great genetic whirlpool such as ours seems also to be, caused possibly by an unprecedented flood of cosmic radiation."

"Man is always most significant to himself," said the man with owlish glasses. "The question before us, however, doctor, is whether a species of another order, of a quite different class and phylum, an invertebrate, whose members have disappeared completely in our own country due to lack of sustenance, may have survived in other parts of the world and have developed a vastly larger size, with an intelligence comparable at least to man's early tribal intelligence in communication and cooperative effort in the hunt. And with unknown prospects of possibly surpassing even our own super-homo at some not too distant date."

I didn't know what they were talking about. They weren't talking about Danny though, any more. I felt a little weak.

The big man was back again. He picked up a pencil and broke it in his hands,

"The conclusion seems inescapable, doctor," he said. "Certainly not all members of the order were comparatively minuscule in size, nor solely dependent on insects for their food, like those we knew. There were, specifically, the much larger so-called birdeaters and other lesser-known giant species of the equatorial jungles. Undeniably they would have had time to establish through several generations their own mutations, if such have occurred, including an increase in size, an adaptability to changed environment and conceivably a high humanlike intelligence. At times over the past several years we have had the apparently fantastic stories from the interior of Brazil about solitary Indian hunters, and even whole jungle families in their huts, who have been overwhelmed by groups of the fabled Tigre Aranha working in concert—"

## *Night of Horror*

I turned to lay my gun and shells down on the couch beside me.

"—stories heretofore all completely discounted by science," the big man's voice was going on. "However, today we have been confronted by the reports of the tragedy of Iniquillos, and the crash of the airliner from Manaus less than three hours ago—"

The black headlines of the paper on the couch were beneath my eyes. And I was stumbling out of grandfather's barn again, clawing at my hair and face.

"Giant spiders—"

Somewhere in the house there was a faint thudding which was not the thudding of my heart.

"Dan! Dan!"

From the kitchen! I threw two shells into my gun. Don't ask me why. I went back out there at a stumbling run. "Irene! Where are you?"

"Dan! Oh, please!"

I threw the bolt of the basement door and jerked it open. I caught her against me as she sprawled forward from the top step, with her dark hair matted and blood trickling down her face.

"The chair I was standing on! It tilted beneath me, Dan!" she said in gasps. "I grabbed the preserve closet, and it toppled forward on me as I fell. I think a corner of it must have hit my head and given me a concussion. It must have smashed the light bulb too, I was lying down there on the floor in the dark, everything around me all sharp and squashy! I had a terrible time finding the steps! Oh, Dan! What a dreadful day!"

Her scalp had a deep cut back of the hairline, and her palms and the knees of her brown corduroy slacks were covered with pieces of glass smeared with jelly. She had hurt her right leg too. I couldn't tell how badly.

"How long ago did it happen, girl?"

"I don't know. They were about to have a program with a lot of important scientists discussing the ghastly thing down in Brazil. I thought I'd just have time to take the last load down before it began. I guess I was in too much of a rush."

"It must have been only a minute or two before I got back," I said. "I thought you were upstairs with Danny."

"I put him to bed a little before his regular time," she said, still dazed. "I tried to keep him from hearing the news all day. He's so intelligent, but in so many ways he's even more helpless, and a baby, and needs even more to be protected from fear and shock. What are you doing with your gun, Dan?"

"I was just putting it away."

I helped her over to the sink and ran lukewarm water for her to hold her hands under, to rinse off as much as possible of the glass. There wasn't any doctor who would come out so far, so late, for anything short of death. I might have to wake up Danny and take him along in to the hospital. I mopped the blood and muck from her face with wet paper towels, and tried to get some of it out of her hair.

"It's still bleeding," I said. "Let me get you on the couch in the living room while I see how bad your knee and ankle are. I haven't heard anything, Irene, all day. Just something over the radio this morning about a gray carpet."

"A whole town!" she gasped. "They must have planned it a long time, all working together. Thousands of them, as big as the biggest octopuses! It's believed to have happened two nights ago. There's no human life left beneath the carpet—only shadows moving. The government is sending army planes over to drop gas and fragmentation bombs. They say it's the only thing to do. Thousands of them now! Soon there may be millions, covering the whole earth! You know the way they breed."

"It's a terrible thing," I told her, feeling the sickness still and the remembrance of the film over my face. "But don't let yourself go to pieces. Terrible things have happened since the world began. The great scaly dinosaurs in the giant reeds beside the river, when we had to go down to drink, and nine-tenths of us would die. The tigers' bloody jaws seizing our parents and our brothers and sisters, and only we were left deep in the cave. But we have survived. They aren't going to cover the whole earth with their filthy cities and feed on us like flies. They can be destroyed, and all their nests and lairs, now that we know they exist, before they multiply too much or become still more intelligent and evil, even if a million square miles of living green hell have to be mushroom-bombed as dead

as the moon. It's natural for everybody everywhere to be horrified, I know, but there's no reason for us to go to pieces. Get hold of yourself, Irene. They are all a long way away."

"The *Magdalena*!" she said. "The big S.C.A. liner that took off today from Manaus. Down, in the Everglades!"

"Down?" I said. "I saw one of the big regular evening S.C.A. liners heading up for New York when I was turning onto Goodhaven Road only a little while ago. They're safer than a railroad train. There's nothing that could get one down."

"That must have been the *Don*, from Buenos Aires," she said. "The *Magdalena*! A hundred and eighty passengers aboard it, and all the crew! Oh, Dan!"

I had got her into the living room, to the couch. I snatched the newspaper off and dropped it over the back, out of sight, as I helped her to ease down. There was a wirephoto on it that I didn't want to look at.

On the TV screen they were still having their discussion, talking about arthropods and arachnids and araneids, phyla and classes and orders, about genes and bio-molecules and some kind of nucleic acid that was maybe the key to life and intelligence. I knelt and took her shoe off, rolled up the leg of her slacks above her swollen knee, with my gun on the floor at my feet.

"No broken bones, I don't think," I said. "When you've rested, maybe I can get you upstairs and into a hot tub, after I've bandaged up your head. What about the *Magdalena* in the Everglades?"

"We are interrupting our panel discussion," said an announcer on the TV, "to bring you a special interview from Idlewild Airport in New York City with Captain Mackland of the Southern Cross airship *Don*, just landed from South America, who was in communication with the *Magdalena*, a sister ship, for a half hour before it went down in the Everglades, and who flew low over it after its crash." A tall lean man, with a drawn face beneath an officer's peaked cap, and a short hatless man with rumpled hair, holding a mike, were standing in the foreground of the screen then. There was a great confusion of voices and other sounds. Behind them, and at the edges of the flood-lit scene, policemen were pushing back a crowd. In the background were the landing ramp and passenger door-

way of a giant plane; and at the top of the screen, above the two men, was the tip of one of its wings, with the shadow of a thin rope swaying as it hung down.

It was the plane that I had seen in the bright moonlight. It had landed up there, two hundred miles away, in little more time than it had taken me to putter a couple of miles home.

"You saw the *Magdalena* crash, I understand, captain," said the man with the rumpled hair. "Will you tell us about it?"

The tall lean man wet his lips, bending to the mike which the rumpled man thrust at him.

"We took off from Buenos Aires," he said. "A stop at Rio. A normal flight. Over the Caribbean I was talking to the *Magdalena*, which had taken off from Valparaiso and put down at Manaus on the way, and was then about a hundred miles, about ten minutes, behind us. Bill—Captain Norjac, her skipper—told me about all the hysteria at Manaus, and how swarms of army planes had been taking off for Iniquillos up at the edge of the jungle, which these Tigres Aranhas were supposed to have enwrapped. I don't think he quite believed it had happened. He joked about how he had been radioed by the tower after he left there that a swarm of giant striped things had been seen leaping from the treetops as he cleared the end of the field, and that a bunch of them had fastened on his wings. They advised him to put down at the nearest field if he couldn't shake them off. He thought they were nuts at Manaus. Or if there had been such things, that they must have been frozen and swept off at his altitude and speed. He kidded me that if he could only bring one back alive, maybe he could sell it to the Bronx Zoo for a million bucks. Right afterward—"

The lean man wet his lips again.

"Go on, captain!" the rumpled man urged. "A hundred million people want to know."

"Right afterward I heard him report that a gray curtain had suddenly been dropped over all his windows, and he had lost all visibility. He was going down in a vertical sideslip, trying to shake it off. I heard him report then that he had straightened out, having been unable to get rid of it after a succession of half-rolls and other maneuvers, and was proceeding blind on instruments. I was up

off Fort Lauderdale. I hauled around to rendezvous with him and see him home. I sighted him as he came in over the Everglades, down to eight thousand feet. He was calling then that his controls were jammed or cut. I saw him going down in a wide, loose, left spin, all tangled—"

"Go on, captain."

"I flew over, low," the lean man said. "Not more than fifty feet. The terrain was all swamp hummocks and silver water. It was like a gray fallen tent, with things leaping. I made another pass over, but there couldn't have been any survivors of the crash itself. I had my own passengers and ship that I was responsible for. I zoomed up, reporting it, and headed on home."

"Weren't you concerned that some of those things might leap up and fasten on your own wings, captain, while you were flying over?"

"I thought of it with the second pass I made," the lean man said. "That was why I pulled the wheel back against my belt and blasted the hell up out of there. But I guess none of them were quick enough to make it."

The long shadowy rope swaying from the end of the wing above him floated down across the center of the screen.

"Look out!" somebody yelled.

The crowd beyond the police were tumbling back. The lean airman and the man with the mike disappeared from the screen. The sound went off. Distorted faces and running figures jerked and bobbed around in silence. After a moment the scene changed back to the studio announcer.

"We have a report from Idlewild," he said. "The Don is being gone over foot by foot. But there seems to be nothing except the single thread which you may have seen on your screens. One of them apparently did succeed in fastening on temporarily, but couldn't do anything alone. It was either swept off or launched itself off again. Navy planes from Key West have located the site of the *Magdalena's* crash, and preparations are being made to reach it with ducks and swamp boats at the earliest possible moment. We will keep you informed of any new developments. We are now returning you to our panel discuss—"

Upstairs I heard Danny cry out, "Daddy!"

"Danny!" Irene said frantically, struggling to get up. "He called me!"



She was the one he always called to do all the things a mother has to do. I wasn't home all the time either. But he had called me now.

I had my shotgun in my hands as I went up, four steps at a time. I put my foot against his door beside the knob, and it burst open. I went in. The window facing me across the room was wide open.

Danny was sitting up in his slat-sided bed in the corner, in his blue woolly pajamas. He looked at me with his wide grave eyes beneath his broad shining brow. There was nothing in the room that I could see.

"It's just outside the window, daddy," he said.

"What?" I said. "You must have just seen a vine or something like that against the moonlight, boy."

"It had arms and hands," he said.

"Look," I said. "See the shadow on the wall." I lifted my left hand for an instant from the gun, wagging my fingers. "We used to make all kinds of funny shadows that way when I was a boy. That was a spider. I'll make you a rabbit in a moment."

My finger was hooked on the trigger, watching the window.

"It had eight arms, daddy," he said. "I counted them. It opened the window wide. Is it bad?"

"Yes," I said. "I won't try to lie to you, boy. You've got to have your own fears too. There are bad things. And best to know them."

I moved inch by inch toward the window. There was the whisper of a soft bubbling out there, just below the ledge.

"You're a cave man, aren't you, daddy?" Danny said.

"That's right," I said. "I'm an old cave man, boy. I'm a Neanderthaler."

Downstairs on the TV they were still talking back and forth, I could imagine, about their zoology and anthropology and mutations and the chemistry of life, and how man must have happened just by chance, and might someday be wiped out of existence by the development of a more intelligent order of animal. But man's life was more than genes and bio-molecules, I knew. It was more than all his own intelligence. It was something in his fiber, call it heart or soul or guts or spark, that no other kind of living thing ever would have or could have, no matter how intelligent. It was love and tenderness and sympathy and

dreams, and individual self-sacrifice and hope of heaven and God. So that, when the sabertooth came screaming into his cave, he had dropped the ochered sticks with which he was painting his beautiful pictures on the wall, and grabbed the firebrand and thrust it in the tiger's face, standing his ground to give his family and fellows time to scramble back beyond reach, even though he must die.

"Come in, tiger!" I said. "Come in, Tigre Aranha! I know you're poison and quick with nets. Come in, and I'll smash you with my rock! I'll club you down! I'll smash your great squashy body!"

There was the whisper of that bubbling, like a crab's jaws, just below the ledge. Again I felt the horror of that fetid curtain clinging to my lips and eyes and hair. My knees were water, but I kept the gun steady. I inched toward the window.

"Come on in!" I said. "This is my cave! I'm only a man, your meat. Are you afraid, tiger?"

Something swept up fast over the window ledge. I fired. A branch full of dead leaves, that tore to tatters in the blast, some in, some out. It was smart.

"Come on in!" I said. "Come flying, tiger!"

I inched forward. The whisper of that bubbling sound had ceased. I moved to the window on numb feet. Outside, the moonlight, filtering through the sere leaves and half-bare branches of the Lord Protector Oak, lay full of stripes and shadows over the yard, the hedge, and the Kings' place across, where the garage floodlight had gone out.

Beneath the window, on the house wall, nothing. Only the dark foundation planting a dozen feet below.

"You're brave, daddy," Danny said bravely. "I wasn't the least bit afraid, after you came."

"Of course not," I said. "We've never been afraid. We've always been brave, Danny, through a million years. And your sons and your sons' sons, too, no matter how all-wise they are, must continue to be brave and to be men."

Shadows of the tree and hedge and bushes. Across the road at the Kings' place there was no light at all except the moon. The Kings' palace. A line from The Proverbs was suddenly in my mind—"The spider takes hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces."

Beyond the open dormer window in the attic, in the house alone. Maybe only an ordinary human kid, but as sweet and beautiful as they grow. Younger even than Danny. We had never heard her cry at all. But from her window across there I heard her whimpering cry.

"Danny! Dan!" Irene was sobbing from the doorway behind me. "Oh, my God! Little Nancy!"

"Close and brace the door behind you!" I said. "Close and lock the window after me. Grab Danny's baseball bat. Nancy! Nancy!" I shouted out the window. "Uncle Dan is coming!"

It was terribly much harder to leave my own cave—to go out into the shadowy lurking night, among webs that I could not see. I grabbed the window ledge, with my gun clamped downward between my thighs, and dropped into the shadows of the bushes on the spongy ground below. I picked the gun up and I was running.

No time to turn aside and haul one of my aluminum ladders out from the back of my station wagon, and carry it across to climb with it up to her window. I would have to go in the front door and up the stairs, in blackness if I couldn't find a light. With that thing waiting! And perhaps already, in the instant, having spun and thrown its threads and cobweb sheets and dirty sticky tunnels.

"Nancy!" I was shouting. "All right, Nancy! Uncle Dan is coming! Don't be afraid!"

But it wasn't inside the Kings' house yet. It hadn't taken hold with its hands yet in their palace. It was in the littered garage-shed at the side. It was hanging from the center rafter, among the old gunny sacks and tire chains, its legs wrapped around the prize smoked ham, I saw in the moonlight shadows. Perhaps it liked pig meat best, or maybe the wide doorway had been the quickest place for it to dart into when it saw me come running across the road, shouting. But there, anyway, it was.

"Tiger!" I shouted when I saw it.

I swept my gun to my shoulder, The Thing leaped and scuttled to the back of the shed, among the crates and broken chairs and boxes. It was invisible in the trash, but deep back there I could hear it bubbling.

"Come on!" I said. "Cast your nets at me! Try flying at me, tiger!"

*Night of Horror*

There was only one shell in my gun. I inched toward the left-hand open door. With eyes watchful on the tangled nest of shadows at the back, my finger on the trigger, I half stooped and grabbed the potato that Lem King had stuck on his fuel-can spout, standing there. I heaved the potato left-handedly at the back of the shed. I kicked the can over on its side, and kicked it rolling toward the back. I smelled and heard it gurgling and spouting out over the oil-soaked floor.

I backed a foot. I fumbled out a box of matches with my left hand and opened it, pulling one out. I dropped the box on the gravel, putting my foot on it. Watching, trigger-tense, ready in the instant for the flying leap or scuttling rush, I crouched, and struck the match on the box. I held it till it was burning, and dropped it inward on the floor. In that instant I leaped backward and slammed both doors shut, one and the other.

I don't know why frying pans are sometimes called spiders, or why I should have thought of it just at that moment. I don't know if the tiger screamed, or if it was just the roaring of the heat. The frying pan in the fire.



## THE MURDERER

JOHN BANTREAGH backed away from her a step on caving knees, with his gaze still on her. She looked so helpless, and somehow innocent, lying here on the meadow grass in the gray, still dawn, in front of his farm-truck wheels. In her white dress with its big red polka dots and red patent-leather belt, and her white shoes with their red heels. With her red mouth and light-brown curly hair, and her hazel eyes open.

Looking at him, it seemed like, out of dream-filled sleep, a little blankly. As she did sometimes in the early mornings, while he dressed quietly to go out and do the chores, with eyes wide open, though not yet all awake. But, of course, she wasn't. There was an opaqueness on her lenses, there was a cold dew on her face, and she was dead.

One wheel had gone over her throat and the other over her sheer-clad ankles. Her legs had hardly been hurt at all, he thought; the ground was soft, and they had just been pressed down into the mire and grass roots. Only her throat had been broken—the trachea, the larynx and pharynx, or whatever else there was in people's throats that made them live and breathe. That made them talk too. Her eyes were on him, with that look they had. But she would never say who had done it.

John Bantreagh felt as if his own throat had been crushed, as he tried to pull his gaze away, with his knees caving. As if a heavy wheel had rolled onto it, and—not like with her—had not backed away. He looked around him slowly with his reddened gaze. He had a feeling that other eyes were watching him, if not hers. But it was a lonely meadow, on a lonely road. Just dark pine woods around, and the dirt road two or three hundred yards away, beyond the tumble-down snake fence that bordered it.

His truck motor had died. He must start it and back down across the meadow to the road again. Get on back home before anyone was stirring. Let her be found by someone else. It would be hours, way off here—it might be even days. That would be too much to endure, know-

ing she was here. This evening, if no one had found her before then, he might suggest, just off-handedly, looking along here, as if it were something that had occurred to him without any reason. There was just so much a man could stand.

The air had lightened from dark silver to pearl. It was not full light yet, but it was no longer night. He had never known a moment so quiet and still. Across the meadow grass he could see the tracks of his truck coming in at a diagonal from the road, through the break in the fence, where the weeds were crushed down that grew in the shallow roadside ditch and along the field side of the fence. Two parallel lines, with only moderate waves in them, coming directly to where his truck stood now with its front tires almost touching her. Smooth-worn front tires, but cleated rear tires, which had left their tracks of broad, deep, transverse ridges. They were a pair he had ordered from the mail-order catalogue, and had cost a lot of money. He had got them from the freight office only yesterday morning, along with the things for Mollie and the kids, and the rest of the order; and had put them on when he got back home, with her and the kids watching him.

Just yesterday forenoon, Mollie had been rinsing out some things on the back-porch bench beside the pump, with her wrists buried in the washbasin, and soapy water splashing on the ground off the porch edge. She had paused to brush back her tendrils of damp hair with the inside of her elbow, squeezing out a handful of sand-colored fabric.

"You're proud of those tires, aren't you, John?"

"Sure am!" he told her as he knelt on the gravel unwrapping one of them. "I'll bet nobody else has anything like them in the whole county. Eight-ply, tractor tread, guaranteed for fifty thousand miles. Could have got a good-enough tire for six-fifty less apiece, maybe. But it's smart to get something that lasts, as I can see it."

"I reckon you're pretty smart, John."

"Sure am, honey. I got you."

"How long do you figure I'm guaranteed for?"

"Till death do us part," he had replied, grinning.

She had laid the sand-colored fabric down on the bench and had squeezed out a handful of something black—her

dark blue blouse, it must be, that looked black because it was wet. She didn't have any black things. She didn't seem altogether pleased. The tires had cost a lot of money. Maybe she was thinking of the nice things it could have bought.

"What are you washing out, honey?" he had asked her.

"Just my rayon stockings and some old things."

"Maybe someday you'll have a pair of nylons, so you won't have to take such care of those rayons. I saw Lilybelle wearing a pair the other day. I wouldn't know, but she said they were. I guess every woman likes them."

"Does Lilybelle have nylon underwear too?"

She liked to tease him at times about Lilybelle. It was just a joke. She wasn't really jealous of Lilybelle. She hadn't any reason to be that he knew of.

"She didn't say, honey," he told her.

She had said something else then, brushing back her hair again, but he hadn't heard, having begun to pry one of the old bare-tread shoes off a rim with a mallet and tire iron. The kids had been jumping around and yelling, and she might have been reprimanding them. Vaguely, in the back of his mind, he wondered who would take care of the kids now. It was the first time he had thought of it.

His knees caved and caved. He had heard of men's knees doing that, but it didn't seem natural. He couldn't control them, though. He stiffened them, and they jerked down again as if they were only water. He planted a hand on the mudguard of his truck, taking a dragging step back toward the seat. He must start his engine and back down to the road again and go on home. Now.

There was no sound of distant barn-yard roosters. It must be a good mile at least, maybe two or five, to the nearest house. If there was any wildlife in the woods around the meadow—fox, bobcat or possum—it was keeping very still.

A car was coming along the road already, though. A sedan with some early driver at the wheel. It slowed its bumping progress as it approached the break in the fence. It came to a momentary halt. The driver had seen his truck and him in the meadow, John Bantreagh thought, standing motionless. Maybe he could see the white of her dress in front of his wheels, though the truck might hide that from the road.



The car turned and came in, anyway. It drove slowly along the broad, deep, cleated tracks of his truck, approaching. That it should take the same course was perhaps inevitable, or at least expectable. Every field, however smooth, has its own hidden soft spots, waves and hummocks, and one car will tend to follow the same path across it as another, unless deliberately held to a different course. Particularly when a previous car has already made ruts at the grass roots. The driver of the approaching sedan probably didn't realize that he was flattening out those cleated and distinctive treads beneath the impress of whatever nondescript tire treads he might have himself. Perhaps he didn't notice them. Or if he did, he considered their preservation of no importance.

It wasn't important, of course, thought John Bantreagh. His truck was here, and he was here. He rested the palm of his left hand on the mudguard. His eyes burned red and sleepless. His throat was dry. His right hand hung down at his side with something in it. His truck crank, he realized. He didn't know how long he had had it in his hand. He had been quite unaware of it. He hadn't the strength now to place it back on the truck floor where he usually kept it. Not even to open his hand and let it drop into the grass.

The driver of the sedan stopped with his bumper nudging the back of the truck. He opened the door and got out. He was a big young fellow with a bronzed, square-jawed face and alert and steady gray eyes. He wore a black tropical suit, unbuttoned on an expanse of soft white shirt, black-necktie, and a black slouch hat. He overtopped John Bantreagh by four inches. His lithe, light-stepping frame had the massed weight of two hundred pounds. He was a dozen years younger than John Bantreagh—perhaps he was twenty-five. He looked fresh and well slept and newly bathed, competent and cool.

He pushed back his hat on his crisp black curls. He wore a nickeled badge, pinned to a red suspender strap over his white shirt. There was a polished walnut gun butt extruding from a black holster on his right hip, and a pair of handcuffs hanging beside it from his belt.

He gave a brief, alert glance at John Bantreagh's strained, red-eyed face and thin, shaking form. He stood looking down at the woman's body lying supine in front of

the truck wheels, with his fists planted on his hips and his pectoral muscles expanded.

"What happened?" he said. "Run over?"

John Bantreagh swallowed. "Yes."

"It looks pretty much like it was deliberate," the big young fellow said quietly.

He squatted beside her, looking, not touching. With steady, alert eyes. With his alert and sleep-refreshed brain behind them.

"Name's Clade," he said. "Roy Clade, deppity, from over in Boomerburg. I was due at the courthouse this morning on a car-stealing case, and just happened to take the back road, first time in a year. Never thought I'd run into anything like this."

"No," John Bantreagh swallowed. "I reckon nobody would."

"Yep, she was murdered," the young deputy said quietly. "No two ways about it. Blood on the back of her head, matted with her hair. She was hit with a tire iron or something and then laid on the ground when she was out cold, and the front wheels run up onto her. Know who she is?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh swallowed. "Her name's—her name was Mollie Bantreagh—Mrs. John Bantreagh—from over outside of Jeffersonville. Funny name, sounds like 'pantry,'" he said tonelessly—as he always did, to forestall banal remarks about it. "I don't know where it came from. Some say it's an aristocratic name in Scotland, but I don't know. She's—she was my wife."

"Your wife!" The young deputy shot up a quick, keen look at him. "You mean you were her husband?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh said. "That's right." He could not stop the wobbling of his knees. The dryness stuck in his throat. He rubbed his Adam's apple with his left hand to relieve the pressure on it.

"Tough!" said the young deputy, in a voice of proper sympathetic pitch. "Your wife! Gee! I thought you were just some stranger driving by. I'm not a married man myself. But your wife—she must have meant an awful lot to you. I'll bet this has hit you terribly."

"Yes," said John Bantreagh, feeling his throat. "We had our little disagreements at times, like everybody. I reckon the neighbors know. She always liked nice things a lot."

"All married people have their little battles, I expect," said the young deputy awkwardly. "It'd be kind of funny if they didn't. Gee, your wife, though! Kids, I suppose, too?"

"Three," said John Bantreagh. "Three. Two boys and a girl."

"And no one to look after them now, I reckon. Tough!" the young deputy said again, with an effort at feeling. "It sure is an awful break for you, Mr. Bantreagh. Who could have done a thing like this, anyway?"

"I—" said John Bantreagh, swallowing, "I thought maybe I could get Lilybelle to look after them for a spell. She's not very fond of kids, I don't think, but she might do it for me."

"Who's Lilybelle?"

"Lilybelle Turner, lives next place down the road," said John Bantreagh, rubbing his throat. "She's only a kid herself, just nineteen, and not seeming hardly that old, with her dark curls and blue eyes. All she can think of is having a good time and loving. Mollie—Mollie used to pretend to be kind of jealous of her, just joking. But she's a woman, anyway, and I reckon I can get her to pitch in and help with the kids, if the neighbors don't talk."

"There's always another woman, isn't there?" remarked the young deputy absently. "I mean there's always one to pitch in and help with the kids, I reckon, unless a man lives at the North Pole, when his wife goes."

But he hadn't been paying much attention to the problem, his manner indicated. He had pulled out a silver pencil and a brownish paper-bound notebook from his inner jacket pocket. He opened the notebook on his knee and unscrewed the pencil. John Bantreagh watched with dull, bloodshot eyes what he was writing.

Mollie Bantreagh, Mrs. John Bantreagh, res. nr. Jeff'ville. Struck on back of head by tire iron or other instr'm't & run onto by car's front wheels. Body found by husband—

He looked up with sharp alertness at John Bantreagh, with his pencil halted. John Bantreagh swayed. He leaned back against his truck with his crank hanging from his hand. It was coming now—the question.

"What time did you find her, Mr. Bantreagh?"

John Bantreagh let his breath seep out. He stiffened his knees. It was bound to come. But this wasn't it yet.

"I haven't got a watch," he said tonelessly. "It was just getting kind of silver light. Maybe ten minutes ago. Maybe half an hour or three quarters—I don't know. It kind of knocked me out."

"I'll put it as four forty-five," said the young deputy sympathetically. "The exact time, I reckon, doesn't make any particular difference."

"'Found by husband at four forty-five,' " he recited as he wrote. "'Joined by Deputy Clade at five-oh-three and scene observed. No footprints. No tire tread discernible on body; smudge on nylon stockings indication possible print had been wiped off by hand. Possible tire tracks on field obliterated by husband's car and Deputy Clade's. Implement with which struck removed by killer. No other objects apparent on scene to indicate identity.' I guess that's the story, Mr. Bantreagh."

He put away his book and pencil. He pushed his hat off the back of his head and set it on levelly again, with his frowning gaze a moment on her staring eyes.

John Bantreagh swallowed. "They're nylons?" he said.

"What? Her stockings? Oh, sure. All the women've got to have them. What did you think they were?"

"I thought they were rayons," said John Bantreagh. "The pair I got for her last Christmas. I thought they were just rayons all the time. But then tonight I figured they were nylons."

"Oh, sure," the young deputy repeated mechanically. "All the women've got to have them."

He pushed his hat on the back of his head again and stood up, taking his eyes from her.

"Who could have done it?" he repeated quietly, with his fists planted on his hips, looking down at John Bantreagh's pallid face and bloodshot eyes with his keen, alert gaze, with his fresh, keen brain behind it. "Who do you suppose could have done it, Mr. Bantreagh? I mean," he explained with frowning brow, "she couldn't have been murdered for her jewels and money, because I don't reckon she had any more than just her wedding ring that she's still got on, and maybe a couple of nickels in her coin purse on her belt or something like that. It couldn't have been just a maniac, because how could he have got

her out to a lonely place like this to murder her, without her putting up some sort of a fight and screaming?

"It was some man she knew, who wanted to get rid of her. Because he was crazy about some beautiful little kid who was a few years younger than she was, maybe; and she knew about it, and was always nagging him, and stood in his way. And so he got her to ride out here with him, and he cracked her on the head with this tire iron or something that he had laid on the seat beside him handy, probably while he was making love to her, and then hauled her out and laid her down in front of his car, and ran his wheels up on her and crushed the life out of her. Figuring to drop her body in the ditch beside the road back near where she lived, like she had been struck by a hit-and-run while walking home.

"Only, after he had done it," the young deputy said, frowning at John Bantreagh, "he could see it wouldn't pass. The way her throat had been crushed would be only like she had been lying unconscious on the ground when she had been run over, just the way it had been done. There would be meadow mud and grass stains, maybe, on her dress. And maybe ten or a hundred other things that he couldn't think of at the moment, but that wouldn't let it pass. So it was murder," he said quietly, "and nothing else. And there was nothing for him to do but just leave her here, and go on home and go to sleep, like nothing had happened, waiting till somebody else happened to find her. Figuring that it wouldn't be for some hours yet, at least. And maybe days, because it was such a lonely road. Though hoping, too, that it wouldn't be too long.

"And so, as I figure it, Mr. Bantreagh, he got up quietly from where he was kneeling beside her, when he was sure that she was dead, and backed away from her, to get into his car again, that he had rolled back off her, and back it down across the meadow to the road again. Figuring that, if he had left any tire tracks, a few hours more might dim them out. Or that maybe somebody else had tires like his, or that maybe when somebody else would come along, they would roll over them with their own tracks before they had noticed them."

The young deputy pushed his hat off the back of his head and set it on again.

"Now, there's just one thing that I've got to ask you, Mr. Bantreagh."

A faint dawn breath across the dewed meadow stirred a drape of his crisp, freshly pressed black jacket as he stood looking down at John Bantreagh. It stirred the ends of the black knit four-in-hand upon his expanse of white shirt above his flat, quiet-breathing diaphragm. The skin upon his hard, young, fresh-shaven face was shiny and tight, and a little muscle rippled at the corner of his mouth, though John Bantreagh's eyes did not lift that high.

His knees—John Bantreagh's—caved, and he stiffened them. He leaned back against the windshield post of his truck, thrusting his heels against the ground. His blood-shot eyes swam, out of focus. He fingered his throat with his left hand, glancing involuntarily down. There was a deep scratch or cut across the back of his right hand, he saw, that was gripped about the crank handle. He didn't remember when he had got it, but it was still oozing. Some of the blood must have seeped stickily around onto his clenched palm, helping to glue it to the iron.

Now! he thought. What form the question would take, he didn't know. But it must come. The throat muscles of the big young deputy were still moving beneath his broad, smooth-shaven chin. He had paused only for a moment.

"Just one question, Mr. Bantreagh," he repeated. "It may seem kind of cold and brutal of me to ask it, at a time like this," he added, a little awkwardly. "But if I didn't, someone else would, anyway. And they still will, I reckon, and keep on asking it until they've found out whatever there is to know. You understand, a law officer's got his job to do, and it's just impersonal. What I mean is, Mr. Bantreagh, was there anybody that she had been going around with that you ever heard about? A boy friend that she had, I mean—someone that she had been two-timing you with? Of course," he added, "she might have been stepping out and you not have known anything about it. That happens too. But there must have been someone, just on the face of it, because he would have been the only man in the world who would have had any cause to have done it, as sure as hell. Did she ever drop any hint to you about him, Mr. Bantreagh, as to who he

was? I don't mean to seem cold and brutal at a time like this."

John Bantreagh swallowed. "I know you've got to ask your questions," he said, pulling at the loose skin of his throat. "That's all right. Yes, I reckon there was"—he swallowed—"someone. She used to go down to the village two or three times a week after supper; it's only a couple of miles away. She'd tell me she was going to the free library to read magazines and books. She was always a great hand for reading. I couldn't drive her in the truck, because somebody had to stay home with the kids. I'd be asleep by the time she got home. But it seems she didn't really go to the free library at all. This fellow would pick her up on the road, and they'd go riding in his car. I only learned about it last night."

He swallowed again. He rubbed his forehead with his left hand. There was some small thing he was trying to remember. But there was much more that he wanted to forget.

"I woke up," he said tonelessly, "with one of the kids crying. He was cold, and wanted a blanket on him. Mollie always looked to their covers when she came home or got up in the night herself. But she hadn't got home yet. By the looks of the moonlight out on the yard, it looked kind of late. I held the alarm clock to the window, and it was one o'clock. I lit the lamp and put on my pants and shoes, and went out to the road in front and looked down it, but didn't see her coming. There was something white on the front porch of the Turner house a quarter mile down, but that was all.

"So I went back in and covered the kids up better, tucking them in. They sure looked cute in their new pajamas, and I wished she was there to see them. I'd got pajamas for them with my tire order that had come in the morning, pink and white stripes for the boys, and the baby's blue with white ducks on them. She hadn't seen them in them yet; she'd gone out right after supper, before I'd got them to bed. That made me think"—John Bantreagh swallowed—"of the nylons. Her birthday was tomorrow—today. Twenty-nine. And I had ordered her a pair of nylons. I figured she would like them. She had never had any.

"I had left them out in the truck in back, under the seat, to get and give her in the morning. But I thought it might be kind of nice to put them in her bottom drawer for her, where she kept her things, and kind of say something to her in the morning, joking like, that I had heard a mouse in her drawer last night, maybe it was making a nest. And she would hurry to open it and pull out all her things, and would find them at the bottom, and it would surprise her.

"So I brought them in in their envelope," said John Bantreagh tonelessly, "and opened her drawer and took out some of her things on top, the balls of socks that she generally wears, and her blouses and skirts that she had made, and a couple of starched house dresses. She kept her rayons in the drawer, I knew. But she was wearing them, I thought. I didn't know she had any other stockings." He swallowed. "But there were lots of stockings there, hid away at the bottom. A dozen pairs of them. They were the same color as her rayons, but they were smooth and slick. They had the feel of the nylons I had bought her now. And there were underthings—pink things, silk and nylon things, things with lace on them. There was even a set of black lace step-ins and bras. They were what she had been wringing out, or others like them, when I'd been putting on my new tires that forenoon, in a little squeezed-up handful before my eyes. I don't know what there is about black lace things. They're not what a woman gets for herself. They make it seem more awful, somehow.

"I was kind of upwrought." John Bantreagh swallowed. "There was a pint out in the kitchen cupboard that her sister's husband had given me last summer when they visited, only I'm not much of a drinking man. But I got it down and took some now. I thought I'd better go and find her. I put on a shirt and coat, and put the matches up on the kitchen shelf where the kids couldn't reach them, and put out the lamp. I went out to crank the truck. I had just picked up the crank, when I looked around, and thought I saw her on the back porch behind me, among the moonlight and the vines. Only it wasn't her. It wasn't anything. It was just the moonlight moving."

John Bantreagh pulled at his throat. "I cranked the truck then," he went on, swallowing, "and got in it, and went down the road towards the village. On the Turner



porch steps, just off the road, there was something white sitting. It was Lilybelle, sitting in the moonlight in her nightdress with her arms about her knees. 'Hello, Mr. Bantreagh!' she called out to me, kind of low. 'Where are you going at this time of night? What's happened to Mrs. Bantreagh?'

"I stopped." John Bantreagh swallowed. "I didn't want any gossip started. 'What do you mean, what's happened to her?' I said.

" 'I woke up and came out on the steps a little while ago,' she said. 'The moonlight was so pretty. And I looked up the road, and thought I saw somebody going into your house, like she had just got home.'

" 'No,' I told her. 'It must have been me. Mollie's been home since ten o'clock.' Not wanting to start any gossip.

" 'I love the moonlight,' Lilybelle said. 'It's so quiet and so mysterious. I saw a lamp lit in your house, and then put out again. I heard your back screen door slam, and thought I heard you say something like, "What have you been doing, Mollie?" kind of sharp and mad. Then I could hear you cranking your car. I wondered if maybe she wasn't feeling well, and you were going for the doctor.'

" 'No,' I told her. I guess for a minute I thought maybe she had come out on the back porch behind me. But it wasn't her. It was just the vines moving in the moonlight. I just thought I'd take a ride to set my new tires right.'

"Then"—John Bantreagh swallowed—"I don't know why, but she looked so kind of pretty, with her dark curls and her big eyes, and the moonlight silver on her nightdress and her bare feet, and I had the nylons on the seat beside me, that I'd brought back out to the truck again, without knowing it; and I said to her, 'Would you like a pair of nylons, Lilybelle?' And she got up and came out to the truck, and stood up on the running board beside me and opened them.

" 'My!' she said. 'You sure know your way around, Mr. Bantreagh! What is it a bribe for? Have you murdered Mrs. Bantreagh, and you want me to keep it quiet?' "

John Bantreagh swallowed.

"Laughing," he said. "Just joking. She didn't have an idea that she was dead, of course. And she looked in the back of my truck then, where I've got those old burlaps,

and she said to me, 'Why, you did! You have! And you've got her body in there now, Mr. Bantreagh!'

"'That's right,' I told her. 'No sense in trying to fool you. I hit her over the head with my truck crank because she'd been nagging me about you, Lilybelle. Now the deck's all clear for you and me. What'll it be—Niagara Falls?'

"Wanting to just take it along in stride with her." John Bantreagh swallowed. "Just joking, like a fellow does with a girl when she's pretty."

The young deputy, competent and cool, looked at him with alert and steady eyes, as gray as the dawn.

"For Pete's sake," he said, "is that all, Mr. Bantreagh? I thought you might know something about this fellow she had been stepping out with. But you don't even know for sure that there was anybody. She might have bought her stockings and lingerie stuff herself, with some grocery money that she had held out on you. Here she is dead. Somebody killed her. But all you can tell about is how you covered up your kids, and the new pajamas they were wearing, and thinking for a minute you saw her on the back porch when you were starting to crank your truck, only it was just the vine leaves and moonlight, and then some kidding conversation you had with this Lilybelle babe back and forth, to keep her from starting any gossip. But how is that telling anything about who killed her?" He shook his head with an exhalation of his flat diaphragm. "If it wasn't that it's murder, I could almost laugh," he said. "Maybe she didn't have any boy friend. Maybe nobody killed her."

"Oh, yes, she did," said John Bantreagh tonelessly. "Oh, yes, he killed her. I drove on into the village after leaving Lilybelle. Everything was all dark and shut up, except the Waldorf All-nite lunch wagon on the square across from the free library. I went in there, and the counterman was behind the counter, and a truck driver or somebody eating a piece of pie. I asked what time the free library had closed tonight. And the counterman said it had closed at five o'clock; it wasn't ever open at night.

"I said to him," he said tiredly, "had he seen a lady in a white dress with big red polka dots on it, and white shoes with red heels, with light-brown wavy hair and hazel eyes, and plucked eyebrows and a red mouth, about twenty-

nine? And he said there was a lady like that who sometimes came in between eleven and midnight and got sandwiches or things like that, and took them out to her boy friend in their car, but she hadn't been in tonight. It was almost two o'clock now, he said, and so she probably wouldn't be in now.

"Then"—John Bantreagh swallowed—"the truck driver spoke up, and asked me if she lived up on Jaybird Road, and if she hung around the Swamp Run culvert bridge in the evenings, about half a mile out of town. I said yes, I reckoned she lived somewhere up that way. He said that he had seen her half a dozen times when he was going along Jaybird Road, sitting on the abutment of the culvert bridge in the evenings, like she was waiting for someone. And he had given her his horn and the high sign, only he was generally in a hurry, and there were babes like her along every road, and he could have all of them he wanted. But one time last month, he said, he had come coasting toward the culvert bridge with his engine off—there's a grade down before it, and he was a little low on gas—and he saw her sitting there, not knowing anyone was near. She was stretching out her nylon legs and tightening up her garters to some black lace things she had on. And she had looked up just as his truck rolled to her, and had smiled at him.

"It had driven him kind of wild," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "He had stopped his truck and jumped out to grab her. Just then he had looked around and there was a car that was stopping at the side of the road, just off the culvert bridge, about twenty feet away in the shadows under the trees. There was some man in it, looking at him. He had let go of her and had jumped back into his truck again and driven off.

" 'What are you looking for her for?' he said to me. 'Are you trying to make her yourself? Brother, if I was you, I wouldn't! I'm big and plenty tough myself, and I'm not scared of anything. But there was something about that guy. . . Your wife?' he said—I guess I must have said something—'If she was my wife, with those black lace things and that smile she had, I'd kill her!'

"So I knew." John Bantreagh swallowed. "But I had known when I found those nylons and things. I reckon I had kind of known all along, if I had thought about it. I

drove around looking for her," he said tonelessly. "Along every road I came to. It was just breaking dawn when I came along the back road here. I saw something white off in on the meadow, and I drove in through the break in the fence and found her. It kind of knocked me out."

The breath of dawn air across the silvered grass stirred the ends of the young deputy's black knit tie upon his expanse of snow-white shirt. He stood motionless with fists on hips. There was nothing else stirring about his hard, towering figure or about the world. Only John Bantreagh's knees, which caved and caved.

No, his knees weren't caving any more. It was just a lingering of ceased sensation, that they still were.

"Who was he?" the calm, alert voice of Deputy Roy Clade came to him. "I guess this counterman and this truck driver wouldn't know. But what did he look like? Did they say?"

"They didn't get a look at him," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "When she had come into the Waldorf, he had always stayed in his car across the street, with his lights out in the blackness under the trees around the square. The truck-driving fellow didn't see what he looked like either. He just got scared and jumped in his truck and drove away."

"Cagey," commented Roy Clade. "He was taking care that nobody saw him with her, if he ever had to get rid of her like he did. Maybe he knew from his experience that these married ones are hard to ditch. What kind of a car did he have, did they say?"

"They didn't know the make," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "It was just a black sedan."

"Nine cars out of ten—" said Roy Clade, "nine out of ten are black sedans. I've got one myself. There's nothing in that, unless they got his license number. And they wouldn't have, if he was that cagey. He would have had his plates mudded over."

"No, they didn't get his license number," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "Nobody ever did, I reckon, that saw her with him. He was cagey, like you say."

The big young deputy shook his head. He sighed, with a quiet heaving of his diaphragm beneath his shirt. "It's not any good, I'm afraid, Mr. Bantreagh," he said. "Nobody knows who he is, where he lives, what he looks like, the

number of his car license or anything. Just this counter-man and this truck driver who knew that she had been stepping out with some man that had a car, and maybe two or three more people here or around who may have seen her getting into it with him from a distance when it was getting dark, or getting out of it below the place next to yours when he brought her home. He was awful cagey. He did it, all right, I reckon. But he'll get away with it, as sometimes happens. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bantreagh, but I'm afraid the police have been left with nothing to go on at all."

John Bantreagh rubbed his forehead. So much—so much to forget. That he would try to forget. That he must keep from the kids forever. So much to forget, even of bright and tender things, of when he had been younger and she had been so very young, no older than Lilybelle, and all the world had been pink-colored and full of joy. He had known that he could never give her all she wanted. It hadn't been her fault that it had come to this. It had been his. If he had only been a little smarter. Though it could not be mended now. So much to forget, of shame and grief and failure. But some small, trivial thing to remember. And now he had remembered it.

"Nothing to go on, except what she told me," he said.

"What she told you?" said Deputy Roy Clade thinly. "I thought you said that she had never told you anything. That you never knew a thing about it or had the least suspicion until last night."

He stood motionless. His eyes were gray as the dawn. John Bantreagh lifted his blurred bloodshot gaze and met Roy Clade's gray eyes.

"What she told me after I had found her," said John Bantreagh. "Just before she died."

"You mean—" said Roy Clade, with the muscle moving on his face. "You mean," he said, with his eyes as gray as dawn, "that she was still alive? You mean that she told you? Why, you're crazy, you damn apple-knocking liar! She's been dead since one o'clock!"

His right fist jerked from his hip. He jerked it upward against his shoulder, with a contorted look upon his face and his mouth opening in a scream.

John Bantreagh had got his pendent right arm in motion. He had swung it, stepping in on knees swift and

wiry, no longer caving, cracking the truck crank across the bones of Roy Clade's thick, strong wrist as the young deputy's fist left his hip. With his wrist against his shoulder, Roy Clade screamed.

John Bantreagh snapped his left hand forward, grabbed the gun out of its holster, dropped his crank, side-stepping. He had the gun in his right hand now, and the hammer back.

"Both hands out from your shoulders!" he said. "No use to yell at me and damn me! Heel! You know what this is. You know how it shoots. Heel, and swing your arms slowly back behind you till I have got your handcuffs on!

"Maybe she didn't tell me," he said, with a dry gasp in his throat. "But you did! Here I was beside her body, with blood on my hand, with the crank that might have been the thing that knocked her out, with my truck tracks leading right up to her, and no other tracks but them upon the field! Here I was, her husband, the first man in the world to be suspicioned, even if there was nothing to show that I had ever been around here at all! Here I was, that had drunk whisky tonight, that had given a pair of nylons to Lilybelle after she was dead! That had told Lilybelle I had killed her and had her body in my truck! That had gone in and talked to the counterman and the truck driver kind of wild, and maybe said that I would kill her when I found her—I don't know. A man gets to talking wild when he thinks of his wife and those black lace things, and his man's pride.

"Here I was, with everything saying it was me! Why, my best friends would have thought sure I'd done it! They would have figured some reason why—Lilybelle, or some argument we'd had about the kids, or about some fellow that she'd been stepping out with—wouldn't make any difference who. They would all have said that I had done it. At the least you might have asked me if I had. But you knew I hadn't done it. Only the man who had killed her himself, in all this world, would know that! No need to swear at me. Hold your hands behind you! You know what this is against your back.

"It took me a long time to figure out," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "I was knocked out. Just like a dummy. But I told you what her name was, and you pretended never to have heard it before. I didn't tell you how to

spell it, though—I didn't think that you might write it down. Everybody who just hears it thinks it's spelled *t-r-y*, like 'pantry.' I always have a lot of trouble getting it spelled right. Thought sometimes of changing it myself. But you spelled it right without being told, when you wrote it down in your notebook. I've been trying to think how you knew, ever since you did.

"And other things you didn't think of, I reckon! You've got that tire iron in your car's tool kit or in your garage at home—you must still have it, you've mentioned it so often. And even if you've washed it with soap and water or kerosene, there will still be blood in the pores of the iron, that will show in some of these machines that they have these days, I reckon that you know. There will be blood on your car cushions. Maybe on the shirt and suit you wore last night.

"And you went home and slept," John Bantreagh said, "while I was out looking on every road for her all night! And got up, and took a bath, and shaved and rubbed yourself with sweet-smelling shaving lotion, and put on a clean white shirt and your crisp black suit and your black knit tie, and came on back here to park just inside the woods edge off the road, to wait for her to be discovered. Only I was already here when you came.

"There'll be the blood! There's her name, that you knew how to spell. And somewhere—yes, somewhere, when they get to looking, no matter how careful and cagey you have tried to be—there will be someone that has seen you and her together, when they go looking into it, and can tie you up in an iron way.

"Get into the back of your car! No need to blaspheme me. Kneel on the floor! I'm going to have to put some of my truck lashings around you. You're powerful, and your brain is fresh and new slept and smart. But I don't think you're going to get away. I'll try to get you to the doctor as quick as I can. I'm sorry that I had to hit so hard. I'm sorry that there'll be bumps.

"Kneel on the floor, and pray!" John Bantreagh said. "I wouldn't have ever known who you were. Nobody would have ever known, about you, with nothing to start them looking into you. They would have put it on me, her husband, caught with her, caught red-handed, caught with motive, and I'd have got twenty years or life. And what

*The Murderer*

would have happened to the kids is more than I can bear to think. The fear of it made my knees cave. It made me so blind that I could hardly see. If you had asked me whether I had done it, I would have fallen dead away. But it won't be that way. You told me."

He looked—John Bantreagh—at that still form lying in front of his truck wheels, with her staring eyes.

"Perhaps," he said, "she helped."





# THE LITTLE DOLL SAYS DIE!

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Lady Was a Witch

HERBERT CREEDY found his Park Avenue apartment deserted, windows closed in the summer heat, filmy dust over everything. Madeleine's picture stood on the piano in the living room, blue-eyed and smiling, with golden hair and wistful mouth, mocking him with its tender, dreamy look. She was not there herself, however, though he called her name once or twice automatically. He had arrived home in New York this morning, after catching an Army bomber back from Tulagi unexpectedly and an airline seat from San Pedro to LaGuardia Field, two months before he had expected to have his series of battle films completed and sit down to wait for a slow boat.

He took his kitbag into the bedroom and dropped it on his bed. Looking in her closet, he saw that there was a number of empty dress hangers on the rod, and that her morocco traveling bag which he had given her last Christmas was missing from the top closet shelf, and perhaps a hatbox or some other bag. Her jewel case, which she ordinarily kept in their deposit vault at the bank, was standing on her bureau with its lid open, empty.

There was no particular reason why he should have expected to find her home, since she hadn't known that he was returning. Still, he felt a little disconsolate. He had pictured this moment of reunion all the way across the Pacific—Madeleine's look of incredulity as he appeared in the doorway, then her gay little trill of joy as she rushed into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, I can't *believe* it's you! Oh, darling, you look *wonderful!*"

He was a phlegmatic man, Herbert Creedy: heavy-faced, stolid and middle-aged, with a small judicious mouth and small inexpressive eyes; he did not look at all sentimental. Still, he was. This was a disappointment.

She had no family whom she might be visiting, and no friends with summer places where she might have gone.

She had few intimate friends. She liked New York, too. The country or seashore had bored her and made her restless before very long, whenever they had gone away together.

But it was futile to speculate where she had gone, or how long she might be away.

She wasn't here, that was all.

Removing his cap and tunic, Herbert began to unpack his bag, throwing most of the contents—the canvas jungle boots, the faded chino slacks washed in swamp water, the shirts spotted with leech-suckings of his blood—out onto the floor in a mildewed heap. At the bottom he found the carved black devil-god, and set it upright on Madeleine's spinet desk, beside the phone, where it swayed like a drunken totem pole.

"Here you are, Oscar," he said, with a smile at its menacing look. "America country belong me, belong you now. Sorry many fellow belong me no stop. I give you to her when I see her."

Its name wasn't Oscar, of course. It was something like Esoboro, the Crocodile God, at a guess, one of the boys on Tulagi who made a pretense of knowing something about such things had told him. It was about ten inches high, and made of some very dark, hard wood, which at times seemed extraordinarily heavy—although when he had tested it in water, he had found that it would float.

It was carved in the shape of a man sitting with his legs crossed underneath him. Its head, which occupied about half its length, was long and pointed, with deep pits of eyes, a corrugated forehead, flat nostrils, and rows of pointed teeth in a curled and sneering mouth. Its tiny arms were folded across its narrow chest. Its buttocks and crossed legs were disproportionately heavy, its thighs and ankles intertwining, forming a kind of rounded base on which it rested, like those celluloid toys with round, weighted bases which are called teeter-totters. Its balance, though, was not so perfect as a toy's; any slight irregularity of surface, or at times a breath of air too small to be perceptible, would set it to rocking meditatively.

HE HAD PICKED it up on Vella Lavella. On a northwest corner of the island where the PT boat in which he and his

cameraman were riding down to Tulagi had put in for minor repairs. Finding a trail going in from the jungle shore, he had ventured up it to stretch his legs.

A dark and steaming way, sprawling up over slippery ground among the roots of the giant trees, with the screaming of unseen parakeets and the horrible cut-throat gurgling of the lizards all about him. A quarter- or a half-mile up, the path had ended at the ashes of a burned native house, covering a twenty-foot circular space in the jungle.

The fire had happened some time ago—the charred smell had evaporated, and jungle vines and grasses had already begun to grow riotously over the blackened ground. There was a human skeleton lying at the edge of the burned place, with an arm stretched out towards the center of it, and its skull split down the back. But whether the skeleton of a native or a Jap, or even man or woman, he wasn't anthropologist enough to know.

It had been a tambu house, probably, he thought, because of its secluded location and its size. Ten feet in from the edge of the burned ground, following the direction of the skeleton's outstretched arm, he had seen the little god upon the ground.

It was nodding. Its sinister smile was on him. He had stepped towards it.

The fire which had consumed the house had left no marks upon it, unless part of its blackness was due to fire. It had felt surprisingly heavy for its size when he had picked it up.

It had obviously been abandoned or forgotten here for some weeks, and perhaps months. Whoever owned it might be dead. Still, Herbert had a highly-developed sense of property rights. Upon reflection, he had pulled out his purse and notebook. Extracting a ten-dollar bill, he had written on a page of the book:

To whom it may concern:

Am taking god as souvenir, and leaving bill in payment. Trust is satisfactory.

H. Creedy, Major, AUS  
Battle Films Records  
Special Service Div.  
(Temporary)

That was simple enough. Anybody could understand it, who could read. He looked for a place to leave the note and money. The best place seemed to be beneath the outstretched hand-bones of the skeleton, where they might be visible, yet not drift away. Squatting, he slid them, neatly folded together lengthwise, beneath the dead man's bony fingers. He had arisen, with the idol in his hand, feeling that he had completed a transaction.

"Now you belong me," he told it.

He had heard no step behind him, but something had made him glance over his shoulder. There was a native in a lava-lava standing motionless just behind him, with white-limed hair like sugar frosting, and white lime streaks painted on his face. His hands were behind his back.

For a long moment he had stood looking over his shoulder. The devil-god in his hand seemed to have grown terrifically heavy.

"What name belong you, big fellow?" he managed to articulate, slowly heeling around. "What thing belong hand belong you?"

The black man grinned, without reply.

Then, suddenly, his face had contorted as Herbert turned to face him. He had stared at the thing in Herbert's hand with gaping mouth and expanding eyeballs. With a wild screech, he seemed to leap six feet backwards. He turned and fled like a shadow among the trees, flinging out his hidden right hand, with a sharp-edged bolo in it.

The parakeets and lizards stopped a moment, and then resumed their screaming and gurgling. Herbert stood, gripping the devil-god, a little shaky yet. When strength was back in his knees, he went hurrying and sliding back down the slippery trail to the beach.

The PT boys had laughed at him when he narrated the incident of the sinister native with the hidden bolo. They all carried bolos as a farmer carried a jackknife or a mechanic carries a screwdriver. They all whitened their hair and painted streaks on their faces, too. The guy had probably been a deacon of the church, who had been terrified out of his wits by Major Creedy's own look of menace, thinking the major was going to attack him.

"The fact is, Major, I'd be scared myself if I saw you glaring at me," said the cocky-young skipper with a grin. "You just have that kind of a face."

The skipper had admired the little carved idol, though, and had offered five dollars for it. When Herbert told him he had left twice that much in payment for it, the young skipper said that he had paid plenty. A native could live the rest of his life on ten dollars, and send all his sons to college. He could always carve himself another devil-god.

HE HAD BROUGHT it back to give to Madeleine. She had come into his mind at once when he had seen the thing nodding among the ashes, with its malignant grin. She had a childish pleasure in fantastic and weird things which had often amused him, with his realistic mind.

He remembered how at times she would tell him, when she came hurrying in a little late for dinner, that she had been at the Museum of Natural History over across Central Park again, spellbound among the vast cases of devil masks and demon gods, assembled there from all over the world. She would talk about them, breathlessly and with little shivers, as she hurried to get dinner together out of cans.

"They actually stare at you, Herbert! I saw their eyes *move*! They were *looking* right at me!"

"Soup again, witch?" he would say patiently, watching the labels on the cans she was opening to put on the stove, and feeling his stomach turn over a little inside him. "How about going out to eat this evening?"

"Oh, Herbert, you don't think I'm a good cook!"

"Sure," he would say. "Sure, you're wonderful. But let's go out tonight to some swell joint and make a party of it. You can tell me all about those funny faces at the museum and how they looked at you, without having to think of the dishes afterwards. If they did look at you, who can blame them? Your own fault for being so beautiful, witch."

"Witch" was the name he had always had for her. Bewitching was the word for Madeleine.

She had never been a good cook, though, God bless her. The domestic arts were beyond her dreamy mind. That had not prevented her from having fits of trying to be the efficient little housewife, though, preparing delicacies for her man, as domestic as hell. And he had suffered

accordingly—until Dr. Burgthwaite had put him on a special diet that last time, and insisted that he eat only in first-class restaurants thenceforth, otherwise he might not last long. . . .

He had actually taken the prognosis of the young medical fool seriously, and had been alarmed about himself. Which showed how much doctors really knew. The things he had eaten during these past months, from New Guinea to the Palaus! Some of it would have turned the stomach of a turtle. Yet his indigestion had completely cured itself. He had never felt better in his life.

He would like to have Madeleine see him, so healthy and strong. She would be amazed and delighted by the improvement in him. But there was no way of knowing where she had gone.

THE LITTLE black demon was continuing to nod enigmatically. Its look of smug omniscience was a little too much to bear. He put his hand on it a moment to stop its wobbling. But when he took his hand away, it began again.

"All right, Oscar," he said, as he took off his tie. "If you know so damned much, spill it. You savvy where mary fellow belong me stop? Mary fellow with gold hair, her picture in other room on box-you-pound-him-he-cry? Let's see you do your stuff, Oscar."

It was ridiculous. Only a damned carved wooden thing. Still, as he watched it, the little black demon was nodding, it seemed to him, rather definitely and emphatically towards the window beside the desk.

The window opened out on a court of the apartment building, facing the identical window of the apartment across the hall. As he looked out, he saw a woman standing at the window opposite, hoisting the shade to the top, with a flabby white arm lifted—a fat gray-haired woman in a flowered house-dress, with a fat, good-natured face. Having hoisted the shade, she turned and waddled off.

He remembered who she was—a Mrs. Blennerhassett, the wife of a regular Army colonel, who had moved into the apartment across the hall with two poodles a month or two before he had been ordered into service. He had seen her in the elevator or hallway once or twice—a good old sport, painted and frizzed and dressed like gay sixteen, with fat hands covered with diamonds, and a ro-

guish, hilarious eye. Fifty years old if she was a day, and not letting it worry her. She had seemed to like the company of young people, he remembered—had always been having a young crowd in for cocktail parties, perhaps her nieces or nephews and their friends.

Madeleine had rather an aversion to making women friends, ordinarily. She liked to go around to the museums and art galleries, the movies and other things, alone. She didn't care for afternoon bridge, which most women were always playing. He remembered, however, that she had struck up something of a friendship with Mrs. Blennerhassett, and had mentioned a few times having spent the afternoon with her.

Perhaps Mrs. Blennerhassett might know where she had gone. Perhaps, even—the thought suddenly struck him—she had merely moved across the hall to stay with the old girl, to keep each other company. She might actually be over there now. . . .

Rebuttoning his shirt, he went out to Mrs. Blennerhassett's door across the hall, ringing the bell—half-expecting Madeleine to appear in person.

But it was only the old girl who opened the door, her billowing featherbed bulk uncorseted in her flowered house-dress, her fat amiable face unpainted and shiny at this hour of the morning, her gray hair in steel curlers. She looked at him good-humoredly but blankly, while her poodles beside her sniffed across the threshold towards his knees.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for my wife," he explained. "I'm Major Creedy. Mr. Creedy, from across the hall. I just got back, and find she's away. I wondered if she told you where she was going?"

"The little lady across the hall?" she said placidly. "I thought she was a widow. No, I don't know where she is, I'm sorry. I didn't know she was away. You're looking for my sister, Mrs. Blennerhassett, I expect. She's gone away for the summer. I'm Mrs. Horkins, her baby sister, from Perth Amboy. She asked me to stay in the apartment to take care of the doggies."

"Then you don't know where she's gone?" he repeated.



"Emily? Oh, you mean your wife. No, I've never met her. I don't know a thing about her. Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks. Not now," he said. "Sorry."

She smiled at him amiably, with her fat vacuous face, as he made his apologies and withdrew.

"You aren't so very bright, Oscar," he told the little demon, back in his bedroom.

He had been an idiot to act as if its swaying head might have meant anything. It didn't know where she was any more than a doorknob. Of course, he hadn't really supposed that it might know. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Pursuit of Murder

IT WASN'T the window at which it was nodding, however, he realized—just to be fair to it. Rather, it seemed obvious as he observed it that it was nodding at something beside it on the desk. Indicating the telephone, perhaps.

It didn't mean a thing. But he was reminded that he should call up his office and let his secretary, Grace Meadows, know that he was back. She might know where Madeleine had gone.

He picked up the phone, called her.

"It's Major Creedy, Grace. Mr. Creedy. I just got in."

"Oh, Mr. Creedy!" she exclaimed, her cool impersonal voice warmed for the moment. "This *is* a pleasant surprise! I've had all sorts of nightmares about something happening to you. Quite silly of me, of course. Are you all through now—back for good? I feel like celebrating. I'll have to go out and splurge myself to a double chocolate soda, or something like that."

"How have things been going, Grace?"

"Very well, Mr. Creedy. Or Major, as I suppose I'll have to call you from now on. 'One Man's Poison' is still a sell-out. 'You Slay Me' opens next week. Lieber feels that you did a wonderful job with it, and that it's bound to be a hit, too."

"Good," he said.

"You came back just in time," she told him. "Sam Lewis has just sent in three mystery scripts, and there's another batch from the Associated Producers in this morning's mail. They must have both forgotten you were away. They ask for a quick word, if you would care to take on any of them. I was going to see if I could cable you."

"I'll be in after lunch, and look them over," he told her. "By the way, do you happen to know where that little witch of mine is? She seems to have gone someplace."

"Mrs. Creedy?" she said, her tone aloof and cool. "No, I haven't seen anything of her. She did call up last week, asking me to send her next month's household check in advance. But she didn't say anything to me about going anywhere. Tomorrow is your wedding anniversary, by the way, Mr. Creedy. I have it on my calendar. You wanted me to order flowers."

"Yes, I know," he said a little heavily. "That was why I stretched it to make it back. But she isn't here. Well, that's that. Never mind the flowers now. I'll take care of them myself when I've found her. Thanks. I'll probably be in by two o'clock."

So Grace didn't know where she was, either. Strike two for Oscar, he thought, hanging up.

THE SWAYING little demon had worked over, in its teetering, towards the desk edge. As if it hadn't been the phone that it had meant at all, but something else that it was trying to bring to his attention—of course it was crazy—

He picked up the three or four envelopes lying on the desk. The first-of-the-month light and phone bills, still unopened. An empty lilac-tinted envelope addressed to Madeleine in deep purple ink, in a small rounded hand, and smelling of lilac perfume. A circular letter from the Children's Charity addressed to him. His last V-mail letter to Madeleine, written from New Britain—he remembered the leaky tent in the rain, with the sickly sweet smell of powder and death around him, and chiggers tunneling underneath his hide.

He put the opened bills and the charity appeal to one side, and dropped the envelopes, together with his own letter, into the wastebasket beside the desk, while the little demon on the desk edge rocked more violently.

There was nothing else on the desk except the blotter. He lifted it, but the space beneath it was bare. Still there was a feeling tingling ridiculously in his spine, like in a childhood game, that he was getting hot.

He jerked open the doors of the two cubbyhole compartments at the back of the little desk with some force. But there was only a bottle of ink in one, and in the other a melange of pins and pen-points and rubber bands, bits of string, some last year's Christmas seals, a half-filled paper packet labeled Rat Poison, and a little horse-chestnut figure with a comical clamshell face and stick limbs.

He recognized it, with a smile of sentimental memory. The little funny-face which he had got for Madeleine at the Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe in Quahaug when they had been at The Breakers on their honeymoon, while she had been shopping at the drug counter for other things. He remembered how childishly pleased she had been with it, the sparkle in her eyes, her exclamatory laughter.

"Why, it is positively *dear!* It *does* look so dreadfully comical! I am going to name it *Herbert!*"

He hadn't known that she had it still. He took it out and looked it over, smiling. It did have his face, somewhat, when one looked for the resemblance, with the small pursed mouth, the small eyes, and the clam-shaped heavy jowls.

There was a pin stuck through the center of its small horse-chestnut body, for no good reason that he could see. He pulled it out with his fingernail. Inside, the nut was only green fusty dust. He dropped it into the wastebasket, along with the bits of string, the rat bait, and the old Christmas seals.

"Well, Oscar—"

The teetering little demon fell over, and plunged headlong down into the wastebasket.

HE BENT and lifted it out. On the bottom of the basket, beneath the envelopes and debris which he had thrown away, he saw a glossy, large-sized circular-booklet lying. It had become wedged against the basket's sides, as such large flat booklets sometimes do, and had remained on the bottom when the basket had last been dumped out.

He read: "*The Breakers.*"

*The Little Doll Says Die!*

He set the little demon back on the desk, and fished the booklet out.

That must be the answer to her whereabouts now. It was so obvious, if it had only occurred to him. She had gone back up there to the Cape to spend their anniversary alone. A place where she could feel herself nearest in thought and remembrance to him on that day, though separated physically by the greatest distance possible on earth.

He realized how little he had really known her, with all her seemingly light and transparent nature. A man may love and live with a woman, and still not know her. The date, the place had meant no less to her than to him.

Enclosed between the glossy leaves of the booklet, when he opened it, he found a letter from The Breakers.

Dear Madam:

Replying to your inquiry of recent date, our rates for single room and bath, American plan, are from \$9.00 to \$14.50 per day, depending on location, etc., with ten per cent reduction by the week.

Trusting to be able to make reservation for you, we remain. . . .

The little demon sat motionless, surveying him with its carved crocodile smile.

"You win, Oscar," he said. "You all time smart fellow."

He forced a laugh. The reason it had been nodding before, of course, was because the desk surface where he had first placed it had been imperceptibly not quite level. The reason it had stopped nodding, with its smug look now, was because the spot where he had replanted it was geometrically plane. Naturally. There was nothing in its head.

So purely by accident he had learned that she was at The Breakers.

IT WOULD have spoiled it if he'd phoned her, asking her to return. The only thing was to join her there, continuing the surprise. Calling up Grand Central, he learned that the daily Chicopee express left at 11:09, in little more than an hour. No reservations available on it, but he could take his chances of getting a seat in a coach.

He packed the little demon for Madeleine into his weekend bag, together with slacks, swim trunks, and other beach vacation accessories, and took a cab to his office, a block from Grand Central, to pick up the scripts from Associated and Sam Lewis. The office was closed. Grace had gone out to celebrate his return, no doubt, with her double chocolate soda. He could not wait for her. He filled his briefcase with the playscripts, and left a note for her, telling her that he had been in and taken them, and would be in again with a report on them not later than next Monday.

He expected to arrive around six or seven, in time for dinner with her, with perhaps a bottle of champagne to celebrate his return; and making an amusing ceremony of presenting the little demon to her.

His train from New York was delayed, however, by a freight derailment on the line; following which the last bus from Chicopee to Quahaug Beach broke down along a lonely stretch of the salt marshes—marooning him, the only passenger, for hours in the night mist, while the hatchet-faced driver tried to shore up the broken rear-end with various ill-assorted pieces of driftwood, before finally walking back miles to find a phone.

As a last straw, when the replacement bus which was ultimately sent brought him into Quahaug around midnight, he found the village dead and dark, with a five-mile taxi drive ahead of him out to the Inn. The Cape still went to bed at ten o'clock, it seemed, with a profound and vegetative slumber, come war or wide water, as it had when Madeleine and he had spent their honeymoon at The Breakers six years ago.

Standing on the dark, narrow street in front of the post office where the rickety little bus had debarked him, he watched it skittering back up the road, half regretting that he had not stayed on it. He might have found some accommodation in Chicopee for the night, getting down to the business of the work in his briefcase, and making the trip again in the morning. Madeleine would be asleep when he reached The Breakers now, anyhow. However, the tail-lights of the bus were receding, and it was too late for that. Across the street from him there stood the silver-shingled, ramshackle old movie hall, with the Quahaug Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe next to it, and a dim light

in the front office of the taxi-garage a few doors down. Carrying his bags, he crossed towards it.

The old movie shed had a sign above it, "Fish Pier Theater." In the glass case in front there was a crudely lettered poster announcing some forthcoming amateur play called "Horror"—and probably well named. He was reminded that in the past two or three seasons Quahaug had become something of an amateur theatrical colony, a Mecca for budding poetic playwrights and other would-be dramatic geniuses. He had a professional's discomfort and dread at the thought of amateurs. He would do well to avoid them, if any were at The Breakers.

The Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe window contained its remembered tall glass urns, filled with red and blue water, flanking an assortment of clamshell necklaces and other souvenir novelties for the tourist trade.

The shell necklaces and little figures were primitive enough to have come from the Solomons themselves, he thought, though even more crudely done. They showed the link among people throughout the world. There is something of the primitive and simple savage hidden in even the most civilized men, he reflected. Even in himself, perhaps, to some remote degree.

Voodoo and medicine—they were well allied in the window that way. Those big jars of colored water typified the mumbo-jumbo which still surrounded the medicine man's profession, he thought. He had been off doctors ever since young Dr. Burgthwaite had told him portentously, more than a year ago that he would probably die in a short time of gastroenteritis, unless he watched himself carefully. Now, after six months of the hardest kind of living out in the South Pacific he felt infinitely more fit than when he had left.

He passed on from the drugstore to the taxi-garage—to discover that the door was padlocked, and there was no one in the office. Only a night-light burning inside, above the office safe.

Except for that one light, the village was absolutely dark. There were no translucents of tourist homes, and no other taxi places, nor any way to locate a driver and arouse him.

There was nothing to do but to set out to walk it to The Breakers, along the dark sandy road, beside the monoto-

nous slap and hiss of the night ocean, past fog-veiled pine woods and beach-plum thickets, with the infrequent summer cottages that he passed looming vague and dark, and his bags growing heavier with every step.

AN UNGODLY hour to be arriving. He had missed Madeleine's look of dreamy blank surprise, the sudden little trill of recognizing rapture as he appeared in the door. He had missed the humorous ceremony of presenting the little demon. The champagne which they would have drunk together, would not now be drunk. Not in the same way, nor at that time, already past. She had been long asleep by now. It would have been better if he stayed over in Chicopee until morning.

The inn's low-spreading wings were dark, looming solitary on the dune edge overlooking the sucking ocean. He passed the beach-plum thicket edge of Rotten Bottom marsh, and was on the inn grounds. Only a dim light showed from the downstairs lobby as he went up the drive.

A station-wagon, lettered "The Breakers," was parked in front of the veranda steps, with its luggage tailboard down. For the transportation of guests, probably, to and from the bus terminus in the village. If he had known of it, he might have phoned from Quahaug.

His bag felt like two hundred pounds. For the moment it did not seem to him that he could carry it the last few feet up the steps, not possibly, after carrying it so far. He set it down to change arms again, as he had done periodically during the long walk.

One of the snaps had sprung open. He closed it, and the other one sprang open. He closed them together, firmly. He picked bag and briefcase up again, and carried them up the steps and in.

The cozy lobby, flower-wallpapered, broadloom-carpeted, and chintz-divaned, had only a couple of lights lit in it as he shouldered in—a pewter wall-bracket just inside the door at his right hand, and a gooseneck lamp on the white desk-counter across the room.

In the fireplace a wisp of smoke wafted straight up, motionless and pencil-thin, from a foot-deep pile of wood ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants in their china jardinières looked dead. A green-and-yellow parrot sat

chained on its perch at the foot of the green-carpeted white staircase, with its head beneath its wing. There was a dim bulb lit above the landing turn of the staircase.

Two or three bags were stacked at the left side of the door, a morocco bag and a couple of striped linen ones, with cardboard tags tied to their handles—luggage of some of last evening's arrivals which had not yet been carried to their rooms, or of some of tomorrow morning's early departures which had been brought down in readiness to carry out, he thought. He set his own bag down inside the door, but on the right-hand side, beneath the light, separate from those others.

Behind the desk an ancient clerk sat sleeping on his stool with his withered bald head resting forward on the register, beneath the gooseneck lamp. His veined hands twitched like sleeping salamanders on the counter beside his head. His breath gurgled as he slept.

"Good evening," Herbert said, standing at the desk.

THERE WAS a little nicked push-bell on the counter. After a moment of waiting, he pressed it. The old man lifted his head with a jerk, with a blink and shake of his blurred watery eyes.

"Hey?" he said.

"Good evening," Herbert repeated. "Have you a—"

He had been going to ask, "Have you a Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York registered?" But it was unnecessary. A belated recognition had functioned in his mind. The morocco bag stacked with the others by the door, waiting to be carried up or out, was here. His retina had photographed the gilt initials stamped on it, "M.X.C."—X for Xanda, the numerological name which she had taken for her middle one, with her childish love for the weird—and the room number tag on it, "215."

He would not want to wake her at this hour. She loved her sleep so, the little witch. It would spoil her day tomorrow.

"A room?" he said.

"We're filled up," said the old man querulously. "We're filled up to the brim. How many times have I got to keep telling everybody that?"

"That's all right," Herbert said.



"It's not my fault," said the old man. "Don't go a-blaming me. I never see so danged many people wanting a beach vacation. It must be all the war workers. I haven't even got a room to sleep myself. I've got to double up on a danged army cot with George, the day clerk, in the attic, and he leaves everything stunk up with lilac water. At my age, it's not right."

"That's too bad," said Herbert. "It doesn't really make any difference about me for tonight. I have some reading I should do. I merely thought if you had—"

"Maybe in the morning," the old man said, relenting. "Maybe somebody will die, or something. What time is it, anyway? Gosh all blazes. Two o'clock. I didn't know it was eleven yet. It's danged near morning now. Maybe someone will check out in three more hours or so. There's sometimes one or two of them that leaves to catch the five-thirty bus at Quahaug, to make the New York express at Chicopee. You can't tell."

"How about room two-fifteen?" said Herbert. "Has that just been taken, or is it checking out?"

"Two-fifteen?" the old man said. "Single room and bath, ocean side, rate ninety-one forty-five a week, you mean? I think there's a lady has it."

He turned the register around.

"Yep," he said. "Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York. Registered two days ago. I kind of recollect her. Quiet young lady with blonde hair, kind of dreamy-faced. No, she's not leaving that I know of. She paid up for the week. Seems to me she said something she might stay for the rest of the summer."

"I see a bag of hers there by the door, is the reason why I asked," said Herbert. "I thought perhaps she had just arrived, or was going out."

"George must have brought it and them others down," the old man said. "I'm too old for porter work. Maybe they want to have them put in the storage-room out of the way. Maybe they want to send them back home by express. No, two-fifteen is staying, far as I know. But there may always be someone else. It's not my fault I haven't got anything for you now."

"That's all right," Herbert said again. "I like to work at night, anyway. Perhaps in the morning I can arrange for a

cot to be set up, if nothing more. If you don't mind my sitting?"

"Help yourself."

With his briefcase in hand, Herbert turned from the desk. He selected a big club chair near the wall-light by the door, pulling it up beneath the double bulbs.

He laid his briefcase on his knees. He drew up a standing ashtray beside him. Extracting his cigar-case, he selected an Invincible, clipped the end and applied a match to it thoroughly. He opened his briefcase, pulling forth one of the play-scripts.

The old man behind the desk across the room watched him for a few moments with blurred eyes, then let his head sink gradually down again.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Scenario for Death

HE HAD MEANT to get some of his reading done on the train. But the coach had been crowded and noisy, filled with grime, aisle luggage, nestling lovers, paper lunch-boxes, and sticky-faced clambering children—two of the latter, with their billowing mother, sharing the same seat with him.

And even more than that, there had been the tingling anticipation of seeing Madeleine again, touched with the small but nagging possibility that she might not be at The Breakers, after all—that she might not have got accommodation on her arrival, or might have found it too nostalgic there without him, and gone elsewhere; or might have stopped off somewhere else en route; or might have suffered some illness or amnesia, and have got to no destination.

He was not an imaginative man, Herbert Creedy. His professional skill demanded of him the antithesis of loose imagination. He was realistic, judicious, and pragmatic. Still, it was too easy to think of Madeleine helpless, lost, or hurt. . . with her wistful, tender smile clouded in vague mists before his eyes. . . with the sound of her gay, exclamatory voice rising and fading with the rumbling of the

train wheels, running on and on with words that he could not quite understand. . .

It had been like the time when he had felt so ill, lying in the hospital where young Burgthwaite had brought him after his collapse, and seeing her face near him, hearing her voice that way, through a thick grey veil. An elusive intangible smile, the sound of words which she was saying to him or Burgthwaite which he could not understand, though he struggled to. That had been a hellish experience.

Anyway, he had her located now. She was close to him, beneath the same roof, in her room upstairs in room two-fifteen with bath and ocean view, with the lulling hiss and suck of the sea through the open window beside her, sleeping in the deep middle of the night. She would awake, if at her usual hour, about nine or ten o'clock, whatever the time she had gone to bed, stretching her arms and yawning. She was a little cat for sleeping.

He would go up and surprise her then, standing in the doorway while she stared at him with blank incredulous eyes, with her hand motionless over the yawn that she was patting, not believing it was he. Then springing up with her trill of joy and rushing into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, *darling!* This is the most *wonderful* thing that ever *happened!* On our *anniversary*, too! Oh, Herbert!"

And, "I've brought you a present, witch," he would say to her then.

"Oh, Herbert! *what?*"

"Guess."

"Oh Herbert, don't *tease* me! Let me *have it!*"

"This. I call him Oscar."

"Oh, Herbert! *he is wonderful!* Oh, Herbert, I *love* him! It was so *sweet* of you to *give him* to me!" . . .

But that would be all of seven hours from now. Maybe eight. There was quietness in the meantime. He could give all the scripts a preliminary reading. Perhaps he would have time to read three or four thoroughly, if they seemed worth it. Associated Producers wanted a murder play badly, they had said in their letter which he had read at his office. And Sam Lewis wanted one.

Herbert nicked the ash from his cigar, with an open script in hand. He glanced up.

The thin wisp of smoke still rose straight and motionless in the fireplace from the heap of dead ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants looked dead around the walls. The old man still slept with his head on the desk counter across the room, beneath the gooseneck lamp. At the foot of the green-carpeted white staircase beside the desk, the green-and-yellow parrot still slept with its head beneath its wing. But a sense of something moving, drifting, or creeping. . . .

That was it! On the landing of the staircase facing him, halfway up, beneath the dim landing bulb, was standing a slight grey-clad young man with dark hair and a pale face, and shadowed eyes.

He was carrying a striped linen suitcase. For the instant he had paused with it, descending. He stood looking at Herbert Creedy, sitting by the door.

Herbert put his cigar back in his face, and sucked in smoke.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening, sir," said the young man on the staircase. He descended a step tentatively.

"It's all right," Herbert said good-naturedly. "He's asleep."

The young man came on down, with his eyes on Herbert. He came across the carpeted floor, walking on the outside edges of his feet, a little skittishly, carrying his bag in his off hand, looking at Herbert. He set his bag down with the three others stacked on the other side of the door, with his eyes on Herbert.

His dark hair was glossy and a little long, with a triple wave in it. He smelled somewhat of lilac. His pale face was in shadow, outside the light of the wall-bracket above Herbert's head, but the shadows were intensified under his eyes. He looked about twenty-one.

He paused there by the door, uncertainly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I didn't just understand your remark. Did you say something about being asleep?"

"The desk clerk," explained Herbert good-humoredly, blowing smoke. "I thought you were doing a bill-skip. I

used to be a young fellow myself. I've had to try to get out with my bag, if I could, in more places than one."

"Oh, no, sir." The young man laughed dutifully. "I'm Mr. Sutts, George Sutts, the day clerk. I work here. I was just bringing down a guest's bag."

His pale face was a little damp. There was purple ink on his index and middle finger as he lifted his hand to smooth his rippling hair.

"Are you staying here long, sir?" he said.

"I don't know," said Herbert with a helpless chuckle, giving the answer expected of all American males. "You'll have to ask my wife."

"I mean, sir, are you sitting here long?"

"I've sworn an oath by all that's holy to sit here till I've found a good play," said Herbert. "One that knocks me right out of my chair."

"Oh, are you a playwright, sir?"

"Not a playwright. A play doctor."

"What's a play doctor?"

"Most playwrights don't see their business perfectly," explained Herbert, a little bored, for he had explained it too many times before. "They are men of creative imagination. They leap off into the clouds without realizing it. They have a man ride a horse onto a stage, and then forget to take it off again. Or they ride off on a high horse, when there was no horse on. They write dialogue that looks good on the page, but that would be mush if spoken. They put in some business that sounds swell, but that nobody could possibly get away with. They are the imaginers. It's hard for them to stick to mundane things.

"I have no creative imagination myself," he explained. "I can't think up characters. I can't think up plots. Any dialogue that I do is dull, if solid. But I have an exact sense of reality. My feet are planted on the ground. I know what can be gotten away with, and what can't. So I'm a play doctor, revising and making foolproof the ideas of more imaginative men. It may sound like a very trivial profession. It is, however, an essential one, I believe I may say, saving many good plays from failure, and keeping bad ones from being attempted at all."

He knocked the ash off his cigar and picked up the play script again, dismissing the youth. He had thought him somewhat amusing as a picture of Bill-Dodger Descending

the Staircase. But a youth of that sort could amuse him just so long. He sucked on his cigar. He would have done with George Sutts.

"What do you charge for doing it, sir?" young Sutts said.

Herbert Creedy lifted his brows above his small inexpressive eyes. The youth had sunk down to a seat on the stack of bags. He had his hands locked together between his knees. There were little beads of sweat on his pale, shadowed forehead.

"Twenty-five per cent of royalties is my usual arrangement," he replied. "Provided, of course, that I think the thing is worth my attention."

"I've always been interested in writing plays myself, sir," George Sutts said, making a swallowing sound. "There's a play I'd sort of like to have you analyze for me, whether it could be gotten away with, or not."

HERBERT CREEDY shuddered. He should have been on guard. The Fish Pier Theater assemblage of aspiring amateur dramatists. He had forgotten their existence momentarily. Probably every hotel clerk, taxi driver, and restaurant waitress within twenty miles was an embryonic playwright. They would swamp him in no time, if they started in on him.

"Send it to my office sometime," he said. "I'll give you my name and address, if you want."

"I'd sort of like to outline it for you, sir," George Sutts said, lacing his thin hands tightly, with the sweat upon his brow. "So long as you're going to be sitting here all night, anyway. It won't take long."

"What kind of a play is it?"

"It's a murder play."

"A formularized type," said Herbert Creedy. "A murder is committed. A menace is loose. There's a love theme between the lovely heroine and the stalwart, upstanding, unjustly suspected hero. For two acts. Act three, there's the solution, the killer's caught, the lovers clinch. I'm inclined to think the *genre* has been overdone. You can hardly have anything new to offer."

"But this one's different, sir."

"How so?"

"In the first place," said George Sutts, "there's the young fellow who's the hero. He's not just an ordinary

type. He's a very good-looking and superior type, very sensitive and intelligent and charming. I call him—well, I call him Gordon. It's a good substantial name, simple and manly. He's a promising young playwright."

Herbert Creedy smiled. Most amateurs make their heroes playwrights or novelists, depending on whether they are writing plays or novels.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, there's a rich old girl who falls for him. I call her—well, I call her Mrs. Breed. Her husband is in the Army overseas. Say in the South Pacific, or maybe France or Italy. It doesn't make any difference. He doesn't come into it, anyway. He's just a colonel or something overseas."

"Leave him out of it, if you don't intend to bring him into it," Herbert Creedy suggested. "Confine yourself to the characters of your play."

"Yes, sir. Anyway, he's got dough, and she doesn't just have to live on his allotment. She's got a swell little apartment on—well, say Fifth Avenue in New York. All kinds of money to spend on a good time. Jewels that would knock your eye out. She's old enough to be Gordon's mother maybe, but she goes off the deep end for him. Bang, like that. He's an awfully attractive guy, naturally. All the women fall for him."

"Does he respond to her passion?" said Herbert Creedy, drawing on his cigar.

"Oh, he doesn't really respond, naturally. Who could fall for the old hen? She's as old as the hills and godawful. But he acts sweet to her, so as not to hurt her feelings. They have some parties together and good times. She doesn't support him, though. He's not a gigolo. Anyway, she thinks that men should have jobs. She just slips him a fifty now and then when he happens to mention he's broke. Naturally, being a gentleman, he takes them."

"Where's your love interest?" said Herbert Creedy.

"Well, then *she* comes in. She's young. A honey. What did I call the old dame—Mrs. Bless?"

"Mrs. Breed."

"All right, I call the girl—well, say Sue. She's just a knockout. Gordon goes off the deep end himself for her. There's nothing he wouldn't do for her. And she's just as crazy about him. It's love, just bang-up love, between

them. Of course, he doesn't let Mrs. Breed know about it. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Well, there you are. The guy, Gordon, takes a job out of the city for the summer, where he can do some play-writing and not work too hard. He pretends to Mrs. Breed that he's going out to get an aircraft job in Wichita or Portland. After he's started on his job he gets Sue to come and join him. Everything is rosy. And then, bang, who do you think pops on the scene? Mrs. Breed. Just out of a clear sky. God knows how she happened to come to the same place. It was just blind accident.

"You get the situation? There she is, on the scene before Gordon knows it, and she catches him and Sue together. Well, she starts in to talk nasty and to say she'd like the money back right away that she has loaned him, and that he is just a gigolo, and other things like that. And he just kind of gets annoyed at her, and kind of strangles her."

"He kills her?"

"Well, she kind of falls down limp on the floor, and doesn't breathe any more. She's dead, anyway."

For the moment George Sutts rubbed his thin palms together, swallowing.

"You have a rather unusual power of understatement," said Herbert Creedy. "Most amateurs overstate. That strangling scene could be very moving, played with restraint. I can feel it." He drew on his cigar.

"Yes," he meditated. "When your Gordon strangles Mrs. Breed, and she kind of falls down limp—a very effective scene."

"Oh, nobody sees it happen," said George Sutts. "That would kind of ruin it. I mean it—it'd look kind of horrible. No one would like to see it. It's just something that has happened. Off the stage."

"What's the new angle that you spoke of to your play?" Herbert Creedy inquired.

"I want Gordon to get away with it," said George Sutts.

For the moment he shivered, sitting on the stack of bags. Rubbing his palms together, he regarded Herbert Creedy with his dolorous shadowed eyes.

"He's got to get away with it," he repeated. "He's the hero. He's an intelligent, good-looking young guy, with all his life ahead of him. He didn't mean to choke the old



buzzard to death. He didn't mean to do it so hard, anyway. She had a lot of money and jewels with her, too, that he could use. He wants to go on having a good time. He's got to get away with it."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Madeleine No More

HERBERT CREEDY drew on his cigar, rubbed his jowls and meditated.

"Unusual," he said. "The critics might go for it. I don't think the public would like it at all, however."

"To hell," said George Sutts, with the sweat on his brow, "with the—I mean, just let's figure it out from that angle. How he can get away with it. So long as you are sitting here anyway, sir. Of course, if you want to get up and go, I don't want to take your time."

"That's all right," said Herbert Creedy. "You have posed a dramatic situation, and how to meet a technical problem. Does anyone besides Gordon know that he has done the murder?"

"Sue," said George Sutts, swallowing. "She knows it, naturally. She had to—she had to help. She and Gordon are just nuts about each other, though. So that's all right."

"How many people know about his previous relations with Mrs. Breed?" said Herbert. "They would bring him at once under suspicion, realistically speaking, as soon as she is found dead."

"Nobody," said George Sutts. "Nobody knows at all. The old buzzard was cagey. She was head over heels with him, but she kept him under wraps. She didn't want her husband to hear about him, when and if he came home."

"What is the location of your murder scene?" said Herbert Creedy. "Some place outside of New York, you say, where he has taken a job for the summer and has had Sue join him, and where Mrs. Breed arrived unexpectedly. But in another city, or in the country? How long before the body will be discovered? What police are there to investigate the crime? What chance is there to conceal it

completely? All those questions are a part of the scene, and must be considered, you understand."

"It's a kind of a place where it happens—" said George Sutts—"well, its a kind of a place like here. A kind of a beach hotel like The Breakers, and a kind of a place like around here."

"A hotel like this," repeated Herbert Creedy. "Then of course the chambermaid comes in each morning. She will discover the body in the course of her duties, inevitably, even if no one happens on it before."

"Yes, sir," said George Sutts, straining. "That was one thing I was thinking of. I was wondering if it would be smart for him to lay her on her bed and put a bottle of sleeping tablets beside her, to make it look like suicide?"

Herbert Creedy shook his head. "Very poor," he said. "They would analyze the stomach contents. It's murder obviously enough, anyway, with the broken trachea and other medical indications of how she had died. There are the finger marks alone, showing conspicuously in her flesh. They would be measured against the hands of everyone conceivable, including Gordon's, presumably. And there you are."

"Yes, sir, I thought of that, too," said George Sutts, swallowing. "That's why I gave the sleeping tablets up. But what if she was found out in the ocean? The marks on her throat might be only rock bruises then. And maybe it would be days or weeks, and there wouldn't be much at all." He swallowed again.

"If you had your murder taking place beside the ocean, yes," said Herbert Creedy. "Though an ocean is difficult to stage. Since for reasons of your play, however, you have had it happen in the hotel, then you would have to get her down to the ocean. You can't go lugging dead bodies around. The desk clerk or people in the lobby might see you carrying her out."

"I thought of that," said George Sutts, rubbing his thin hands. "I thought perhaps he could kind of walk her out as though she was kind of drunk. You know, just kind of stumbling along, with his arm around her."

Herbert Creedy smiled.

"It's been used at times in movies or on the stage," he said. "However, it is always highly unconvincing. A dead body is not a living person. It is either rigid, or very soft.

You can try using it as a device, of course. But nobody would believe you."

"I was afraid of that," said George Sutts, swallowing. "Then I thought maybe of putting her body in a trunk and shipping it to California."

"It would be discovered en route," said Herbert Creedy. "Such things are only an additional advertisement, and an additional challenge to the police. Unless Gordon is extraordinarily powerful physically—which I have not understood you to conceive him to be—then someone would have to help him with the trunk. Regardless of that, he must deliver it to an express office or an express man, and sign for the valuation. The trunk itself must have been procured someplace. They know his face, they have his signature, and in any situation he can be traced. He had better jump into the ocean and drown himself than try anything like that."

"I figured that out myself," said George Sutts, swallowing.

HERBERT DREW on his cigar. It had gone dead. He chewed it.

"I find the situation dramatically interesting," he said. "The technical problem. You have a gift of creating character, undoubtedly. You have made it very vivid. Much more so than the ordinary play. I can almost see Gordon. I don't think the public would like it at all. But just as an intellectual problem, I'd like as much as you to figure out how he could get away with it."

"Suppose—"

He chewed on his cigar.

"Suppose you had him cut the body up and put it in some ordinary luggage bags," he said. "He could carry them out one by one, without being noticed at all. Suppose there's some place nearby like Rotten Bottom Swamp below, that dogs and even cows used to be lost in, before it was fenced off. Then you could have him take the bags down there and heave them over the fence, and that's an end of it. Of course it would take several bags, and you might have some difficulty fitting in the head. But it's the way to do it."

"That's the way I'm doing it," said George Sutts. "With a hatbox for the head."

Herbert Creedy nodded appreciatively.

"The hatbox is a nice touch," he said. "Yes, that makes it perfect. Nobody knows that Gordon ever knew Mrs. Breed. Maybe nobody knows that she has come to his hotel. She has just disappeared. He's got her money and jewels, and his girl. The girl is in it with him, and she'll never squeal. He's got away with it.

"God!" he said, using an expletive which he seldom used. "It's the damndest play I ever heard of! What ghastly people!"

George Sutts had arisen. Sweat was on his face. He looked at Herbert Creedy with his hollow, shadowed eyes. He swallowed.

"Would you mind moving your chair, sir?"

"Moving my chair?" said Herbert Creedy.

"You are blocking the door," said George Sutts in his soft, dead voice. "Didn't you know it?"

Herbert Creedy looked around him, with a surprised and baffled face. It was, he saw, a fact. In drawing up the big club-chair under the wall-bracket, he had let three or four inches of it protrude over the door edge.

His bag on the floor, too, he had pushed over, and it was right in front of the door.

"Why, I beg your pardon!" he said, arising and pulling at the chair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you were sitting here on purpose," said George Sutts, swallowing. "When you said you weren't going to move till you found a play that knocked you over, I thought you meant it. Thanks."

He picked up the bag he had brought down, and tucked it under his left arm. He picked up one of the three stacked by the door, and caught it up under his right arm. He did it rather swiftly. He stooped and picked up the other two bags in his hands. With his foot he shoved Herbert Creedy's bag out of the way, and caught a hooked finger on the doorknob and opened it.

In the fireplace ash-buried embers caught, and began suddenly to blaze. The dusty palm-trees in their pots seemed to shiver and stir green, like jungle trees after a drenching rain. The gurgling of the old man sleeping at the desk was like the gurgling of cutthroat lizards within that timeless moment. The parrot sleeping on its perch at the staircase foot lifted its head and screamed.

The snaps of Herbert Creedy's bag had sprung open as George Sutts kicked it, spilling forth its contents. From amidst the melange of shirts, socks, swim-trunks, beach-robe and toilet-case, the little black demon rolled forth, and stood nodding on the floor, leering at Sutts with its crocodile grin.

George Sutts gave it one terrified glance, with eyes dark as dead coals, with face as white as paper. Clutching and gripping his load of bags, he went rushing out the door.

HERBERT CREEDY clung to the arm of the chair which he had pulled out of the way. His blood was like water.

That play had gripped him, damn it. It had been so horrible—the murder of that poor woman, the wife of a man serving overseas, by a cheap Lothario, while perhaps his little slut of a sweetheart watched and cheered him on. It had been so vivid, his scheming how he could dispose of her body, planning how he would use her money and her jewels.

Madeleine, he realized, was thirty years old now. She might seem like an old hag, he didn't know, to a pin-feathered boy like that. Her household allowance, her nice but simple little jewels, though no more than his moderate prosperity allowed, might seem like vast wealth to George Sutts.

The purple ink on the fellow's fingertips, like the purple ink on that empty envelope, lilac-tinted, which he had found on Madeleine's desk!

And the fellow had taken out her morocco bag, too!

Oh, God! Madeleine, with him away, turning blindly for affection where she might find it, to become the victim of a ghastly hyena like that! . . .

He didn't know how he had got up the stairs. But he was standing in the green-carpeted corridor, in front of one of the white doors which had the numerals 215 on it, pounding on it with something that he had in his hand. He gripped the knob and lunged again at it, and pounded and lunged again.

"What on *earth* do you *want*? Who on *earth* *are* you?"

*Madeleine's voice!*

What a fool he had been!

His limbs felt about to collapse with sheer nerve exhaustion. He looked down at his hand—at what was in it,

that he had been using to knock on the door. It was the little devil-god. He must have picked it up from the floor. He smiled at it weakly.

He must be calm; not show her what an emotional, excited fool he had been. "Hello, witch," he said. "It's Herbert."

"Herbert!"

"Sorry to wake you up at this ungodly hour," he said. "It's really me, though. I got back. Can you let me in?"

"Oh, Herbert, *darling*! I can't *believe* it!"

She was turning the bolt. The door opened. She stood there. With her little trill of joy, she rushed against his breast as he stepped in.

Her blonde hair was tousled and damp beneath his chin. She had on a bathrobe.

"I wasn't *really* asleep," she said. "You can see I haven't been to bed yet. I had just finished taking a *bath*. I felt so *sticky*. Oh, Herbert, I must have had a *premonition* you were coming! I felt it in my *bones*! How *on earth* did you find me here?"

"Just a hunch, witch," he said, keeping his voice calm. "Came home and you weren't there. I had a hunch you must have come up here for our anniversary."

"It *is* our seventh anniversary, *isn't* it?"

"The sixth," he said. "Since midnight."

"Oh, Herbert, you always get things so *straight*. You seem *agitated*, darling. I can feel your *heart* beating."

"I just had a play told to me by a would-be playwright," he apologized. "A youthful Ancient Mariner who got hold of me. It certainly was a ghastly one. It scared me."

SHE DREW back from him, with her hands upon his breast, looking up at him.

"Really?" she said. "What was it?"

"Nothing," he said. "Forget it. I brought back something to give you, witch. Do you like it?"

He lifted his right hand, with the little demon in it. The devil-god leered at her, as it had at Sutts, and before him, at the lime-smeared black man on Vella Lavella with the murder-sharp bolo in his hand. . . .

Madeleine opened her mouth to scream.

In that instant, across her shoulder, he glanced again at the hatbox sitting on the bed. A hatbox with "E. B." on it.

He had seen it the instant he stepped in. Emily Blennerhassett, without any doubt. Mrs. Blennerhassett, the poor blank-brained gay old sport, with her fondness for young people, with her cocktail parties and her frizzed hair and paint and her sixteen-year-old clothes. With her money and her diamonds. Mrs. Blennerhassett had been Mrs. Breed. Her poor old painted face in that bag now. . . .

*This was young Sutts' Sue standing before him—Madeleine.*

He thought of his illnesses, of the soups which Madeleine had fed him, of young Dr. Burgthwaite's gravity and alarm. He thought of the rat poison he had found.

And he thought of the little horse-chestnut figure with the clam face which he had bought her on their honeymoon, while she had been shopping for something at the drug counter of the Pharmacy and Gift Shoppe, perhaps already buying rat poison. The little figure which she had named Herbert, and which she had stuck a pin through . . . He thought about Madeleine, up long past her usual bedtime, having just taken a shower. . . .

He thought of littler and lesser things. Of her coming rushing in so often and so late, saying that she had been at the museum again. He knew that the museum closed at five o'clock. He thought of many things.

But perhaps he had thought of them before, in the back of his mind, and for a long time. Perhaps he had thought them over thoroughly, and to the last bitter dregs. Perhaps he had been thinking of them when he had picked up the little devil-god there on Vella Lavella to give her. He had been thinking of her, yes. And the black man had had a look at his face, and had been terrified.

She had tried to murder him from the first, for what money he had, for his insurance. She had deceived him with everybody. He had been almost twice her age when they married. He should have known.

Anyway, he had brought back the demon to give her.

*This was Madeleine! This was Madeleine, his lovely Madeleine, with her tender, wistful smile, her golden hair, her wide, innocent eyes. But soon it would be Madeleine no more. . . .*

Even in that moment, with his realistic mind, Herbert Creedy knew that he could get away with it. He hadn't told Grace at the office where he was going; she would

*The Little Doll Says Die!*

assume he had merely taken the scripts to read at home, and by law between them he was not to be disturbed while reading. When he brought them back, read, she would be willing to swear to his alibi, with conviction.

But even that was not necessary. No one would remember him on the crowded train. The hatchet-faced bus driver, half asleep, and the other half of his mind without wits, would not be able to identify him. Nor the sleepy old man downstairs, to whom he had not given his name.

Only George Sutts would remember him. But George would remember him to his regret. She would have love letters in her baggage from George Sutts, undoubtedly, and this thing could be pinned very easily on George.

Yes, he could get away with it, he knew, with his realistic and pragmatic mind. He knew it without question. Perhaps he had thought it all out before. But he didn't know if he wanted to get away with it. It made no difference to him now. Nothing did.

*This was Madeleine. But Madeleine no more. . . .*





# THE MURDER PLOT

## CHAPTER I

GEORGE GRIBBY leaned weakly against the door post of Evans Dodd's apartment, his shapeless briefcase under his arm, his thumb patiently on the bell. With his pointed pixie face unshaved still in the late afternoon, a vague childish look in his bloodshot light-blue eyes, and schemes of murder bubbling in his brain behind them.

If he had been a child, his look would doubtless have been called that of a weazened old man. But not having been a child for forty years, it was singularly the look of a wrinkled gray-stubbed infant.

Add to his undeveloped look his moth-eaten tweed jacket, his soiled blue polo shirt and stained corduroy pants buckling at the knees like a grasshopper about to hop, and you had a cent a-word free-lance writer of highly fantastic mystery stories.

A type familiar in any magazine reception room sitting patiently on a bench with their bulging briefcases on their laps, waiting for some harassed assistant editor to come out and listen to them narrate the plot of the latest script they have brought in, with a pathetic hope in their eyes that it may be accepted and a check given to them for it at once. Humble, persistent and unavoidable.

At least, if you didn't have a whole type, you had George Horace Gribby.

His stories had been buried in a hundred old yellowed magazines over the last thirty years. "The Clutching Terror," "The Eerie Fiend," and things like that. Anybody who reads mysteries has probably read some of them, without remembering anything in particular about them, except just that they all seemed to be filled with a kind of oozing horror.

He lurched a frayed foot over the threshold, as the door of Evans Dodd's apartment was jerked open in front of him. Evans Dodd stood in his entrance foyer beyond it.

With his burly frame clad in a honey-yellow silk shirt and mustard-yellow slacks. With a pipe clenched between tight lips beneath his crisp black mustache.

"What's the idea of ringing my doorbell for fourteen steady minutes?" boomed Evans Dodd. "You ought to be shot! I'd do it for a nickel. I'm a writer. I don't like to be disturbed. If you're selling vacuum-cleaners, go suck yourself up in one of them. If you're a messenger boy from the esteemed publishing house of Stoddard, Rowse, and Fry, go tell them to stoddard, rowse, and fry themselves. I haven't got the damned script finished yet. I'll finish it when I feel like it. Ring! ring! Now get away before I break your neck."

Add to Evans Dodd's muscular, well-nourished frame, add to his ironic, observant gaze and broad intelligent brow, add to his booming voice which always seemed to have a rumble of submerged thunderous laughter in it—add to those physical evidences of a vigorous personality the hundred-and-fifty-dollar gold strap-watch on his wrist, the quiet but swank address where he lived, and you had one of the most spectacularly successful of the younger murder novelists.

Fifty thousand dollars from the movies for his latest, "Lovely Lady." Which was just about what George Gribby had made, all told, in three decades of fantastic plot-spinning.

BEHIND HIM, in the segment of his studio apartment which was visible, a modern wheat-yellow typewriter-desk stood against the end of a sulphur-yellow velvet divan, beside the edge of a tall window draped at the side with a dark gold velvet curtain. A shaft of afternoon sunlight poured through the window onto the gold-colored typewriter on his desk, with a highball glass beside it. Golden gingerale beads drifted upward in the gold-rimmed highball glass. A thin blue streamer of smoke arose from a gleaming spun-brass ashtray on the arm of the divan.

"Just passing by," George Gribby said hazily, fumbling in his jacket pocket for his crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Remembered you lived somewhere around here, and thought I'd drop in to get your advice about a story. You remember me, Mr. Dodd. Mr. Whittington, fiction editor of *Magnificent Magazine*, introduced us at the big literary jamboree that *Magnificent* threw last week at the Blenheim for all the writers and critics. Gribby—the husband

of Mrs. Gribby, the lady in the yellow dress that you so kindly danced with."

"For God's sake!" boomed Evans Dodd. "George Horace Gribby!"

He threw a quick, involuntary half glance over his shoulder toward the quiet golden scene behind him—making, simultaneously, a reflex gesture to close the door.

That would have been impossible to do, however, without violence as well as insult, since George Gribby already had one frayed foot across the threshold and the other on it, while his wrinkled pixie face and sprawling shoulder were half inside. Evans Dodd faced him with a resigned smile.

"George Horace Gribby, the old murder master, in person!" he repeated. "Well, this is quite an unexpected pleasure. Of course, I remember meeting you. I used to read your stories when I was in diapers, as I told you when Dick Whittington introduced us. 'Who in the name of Godfrey,' I remember asking Dick, 'is that extraordinary-looking individual who just came in?'

"And when Dick said you were George Horace Gribby, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I thought you were dead. But there you were, alive and in the flesh. I had to have Dick introduce us. Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Gribby?"

The scrawny old fellow reeked of whisky. With his reeling stance and red-clotted eyes, he was obviously drunk.

"It was most kind of you, Mr. Dodd," he said. "I hardly knew anyone to introduce Mrs. Gribby to—I don't get invited to many of these literary parties any more, and the names and faces all seem to have changed from what they used to be. And she had looked forward so much to meeting some of the famous New York literary people.

"She comes from Hokesville, Arkansas, you see, and I'm the first writer she ever met. We became acquainted when she wrote me a fan letter about a story of mine last year, which started a correspondence. She's appreciably younger than I am, but I don't know that age makes any difference. What I mean is that it pleased her a lot meeting you, Mr. Dodd, and having you dance with her the way you did, and circulating her around among all the other famous literary people."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," said Evans Dodd. "I don't remember what Mrs. Gribby looked like too well, but I'm happy if my casual attentions gave her pleasure."

"She's a blonde," said George Gribby huskily, placing a cigarette between his lips. "You remember Mr. Rowse, the vice-president of Stoddard, Rowse, and Fry, collecting lemon peels from all the gin-rickey glasses and holding them in bunches on his bald head, hollering that that made two blondes, and other funny things like that. All the big literary people seemed to notice what a blonde she was."

"I'm afraid I don't remember too much about it myself," said Dodd. "I passed out towards the end."

"No," said George Gribby apologetically. "I'm afraid I was the one who passed out, Mr. Dodd. The last thing I remember was Mr. Vane, the book-reviewer of the *Times*, lifting Mrs. Gribby up on the bar to show how they do an Ozark hallelujah dance and you pushing Mr. Catherwood, who writes the children's books, in the face for trying to grab her knee. You helped Mrs. Gribby bring me home, she told me the next morning."

## CHAPTER II

EVANS DODD put his empty pipe in his mouth and sucked it.

"That's right. So I did," he said. "Think nothing of it. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Just passing by," George Gribby repeated hazily. "When Mr. Whittington introduced us, you said you might be able to give me some advice about the stuff I do."

"I'll tell you what," Evans Dodd suggested, glancing at his wristwatch, "How about going over to Joe's place across the street and having a couple on me while you wait for me to join you, after I've got cleaned up? We can have dinner there afterwards."

"No, I didn't mean to sponge on you for dinner, Mr. Dodd," said George Gribby. "Wouldn't think of taking so much of your time. And it wouldn't be fair to Mrs. Gribby. Even if she's out all afternoon at the movies, she always comes home to get dinner for me. If she came back and found I wasn't there, she'd be disappointed."

"Just thought I might drop in for a drink and get your reaction to a story before I do it. But if I've come at the wrong time, just say so. Maybe you've got some of your luscious white-thighed lady characters with you. I wouldn't want to interrupt you."

"No," said Evans Dodd with a hearty laugh. "Nothing at all like that, Mr. Gribby. I get my characters out of my head. But the fact is you've caught me in the midst of a frenzied chapter. I'd like nothing better than to invite you in for a drink. But you know how it is when you're hot—you lose the whole story when you break off. Perhaps we can make a date in advance—"

"It's a new way of murdering a man, Mr. Dodd," broke in George Gribby with bleary-eyed persistence. "I'd like to get your advice about it before I do it."

"That's the trouble with all you hacks!" Dodd exclaimed. "You stew and frazzle your brains to devise some utterly fantastic way of committing a murder, and you think you've got a story. Why not just shoot them, or bludgeon them? It doesn't make a damned bit of difference how you kill them. It's who gets killed that counts."

There was a faint *pud* in the room somewhere behind him. He clenched his teeth on his pipe-stem. The kitchenette door was apt to blow open, when the front door was held open this way.

"Now if you'll excuse me, Mr. Gribby—"

But George Gribby was already in. Humble, persistent, and unavoidable, he had oozed his way across the threshold.

Clink! There was a metal sound, very slight, somewhere inside the apartment.

Evans Dodd did not turn his head. "Got a light?" George Gribby mumbled, tapping the end of his cigarette.

*Tinkle! Tinkle!* A toy mouse on wheels, with tiny brass bells around its wheel hubs, rolled out from beneath the end of the sulphur-yellow divan, as Evans Dodd looked around. Under the divan a small yellow furry face peered out with amber eyes.

His yellow Persian kitten, Shah, and its favorite toy. It flashed a clawed paw, hooking the plaything and pulling it back beneath the divan again.

"Scat!" said Evans Dodd. "All right. Come in, Mr. Gribby."

He closed the door. With lips twisted, he followed George Gribby's wavering step into the studio-room.

"All right," he said. "Sit down and tell me about your Rube Goldberg murder invention while I mix up a drink. Do you have a gun made out of ice concealed in the refrigerator, which goes off and shoots the victim smack between the eyes when he opens it to get himself a midnight snack . . ."

Casually, ironically, Evans Dodd picked up his gold lighter beside the ashtray. He snapped the lighter, still conversing, and extended the flame to the wobbly end of the cigarette between George Gribby's lips, where he stood in the middle of the golden rug, clutching his shapeless briefcase against his chest.

"Or do you have a cigar loaded with uranium 235," he continued, "which wipes the victim from the face of creation when he lights it . . ."

The kitchenette door and the bathroom door, at the other end of the room, were an inch ajar, he saw. The closet door between them was closed tight. There were shadows back of his filing cabinets, where they jutted out from the wall in the darkest corner of the room.

The folds of the heavy curtain over the farther half of the window expanse seemed to stir imperceptibly. It was really two windows together; and the farther one might be open behind the curtain, with a small wind outside.

He picked up the highball glass from beside the typewriter on his desk, and moved with it across the golden rug to his maple bar, setting it down there. Stepping behind the bar, he took the empty highball glass which stood on its top and put it away. He drew the icetub and bottle of bourbon on the bar towards him, and got out a clean glass and a bottle of gingerale.

"Well, what do you do?" he asked finally. "There's only one George Horace Gribby, and the homicides he commits are fearful to behold. Tell it to me, George, and I'll see if I can spike what's wrong with it."

GEORGE GRIBBY stood, rubbing a hand on his stubbled cheek. His wandering eyes had focussed on the kitchenette and bathroom doors.

"Well," he said vaguely, "Take a man who uses an electric razor to shave with. Suppose he has a cord hanging from the bathroom ceiling that he plugs it into."

"Most people have a wall or a baseboard outlet," said Evans Dodd. "But we'll give this fellow a cord hanging from the ceiling. Go on."

"Well, I've got one myself," said George Gribby. "Before shaving this fellow washes his face with his hands, and while his hands are still wet he holds the faucet with one of them while he reaches up to grab the cord with the other and steady it before plugging his razor in."

"Who would hold on to a faucet with one hand while he reached up to plug in anything?" asked Dodd. "All right. Some people do. You always do, I suppose. Go on."

"Well," said George Gribby vaguely, "it's an old cord, and maybe the covering has been frayed away just where he grabs it. And maybe there's a lot of juice in it, because it's the connection for the electric heater and the iron. So when he grabs it with his wet hand, holding on to the faucet with his other wet hand, he's electrocuted. When the body is discovered, there's nothing to show that it wasn't just an accident. Nobody ever guesses that somebody had frayed that cord for him, knowing how he always grabbed it. And so it's a perfect murder."

"My God!" said Evans Dodd, lifting the highball he had mixed and looking at the beads rising in the glass. "Do you call that a murder story? It's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

He put the glass to his lips and drank half of it down.

"You didn't just happen to drop in to cadge a drink and talk over one of your half-witted screwball stories with me," he said, with a red light of anger in the depths of his dark eyes. "You didn't have a damned story in your mind to tell me. You happened to feel that you needed a shave, and you ad-libbed it from there. You aren't drunk at all, Gribby. You just wanted to get inside my place as an excuse to look around with your damned rheummy old eyes."

"For some reason you have the insane idea that I'm infatuated with Greta. Mrs. Gribby. The idea that I might be having an affair with her. The idea that you might find her in my apartment with me this afternoon. A girl I happened to meet last Friday at a big brawling party among a thousand other people, and that I'd never seen before."



"I'll acknowledge," he said with an ironic grin, "that I like blondes. I guess there have been some stories about me to that effect. All my beloved ex-wives were blondes, and so anybody would know that I like them. I don't deny it.

"All right, so I like blondes. And I'll acknowledge that when I saw Greta coming in the Blenheim ballroom last Friday afternoon, with that scared, excited, little-girl-in-fairyland look about her, I'll acknowledge that I was just high enough that I had to grab Dick Whittington and gallop to meet her.

"What did I care about a damned old hack like you? You're right. I'll admit that I gave her a big rush. I've rushed a lot of other babes at other parties. That's why a guy goes to parties—to pick a new babe and make a play for her. There were a lot of other guys who rushed her. A twenty-year-old golden little babe like her, married to a wrinkled old hack like you, half monkey and half spider."

He picked up the bottle and poured two inches into the glass in his fist, with his mustached mouth tight.

"Who do you think you are to rate a babe like her?" he asked. "She told me all about it when I was dancing with her. She didn't mean to, but she did. Living in that little hill-billy town of hers, with a twenty-dollar-a-week job as a typist for the local mortgage-lender, and boarding with a great-uncle. Wanting nothing but to get out of it. Wanting New York and smart intelligent people and gay times, like all young girls do. Wanting to be a writer. And she sends off fan letters in her spare time to authors whose stuff she gets hold of, including George Horace Gribby—she was too young and uncritical to know what a hack you are.

"Nobody else replies, naturally. A real writer gets too many worshipful letters from Hokesville, Arkansas, and points east, north, south, and west. But it's the first fan letter anybody ever sent you, I suppose, and you rushed off a reply to her. She sends you a picture of herself taken when she graduated from Hokesville High last year, and she tells you all about herself—what her dreams are, and what kind of a cake she baked last week for the church supper. Then you send her a picture of yourself taken in 1922, and tell her all sorts of phony, romantic things about yourself.

### CHAPTER III

HE PAUSED for breath, took another pull at his drink and glared at Gribby before he went on.

"One letter leads to another, till you think you're in love with her, and she thinks she's in love with you. You write her to come to New York to marry you. She takes her last dime out of the savings bank and buys herself a trousseau and a railroad ticket, with the whole town down to see her off because she's marrying the great George Horace Gribby.

"And what does she find? A wrinkled, moth-eaten clown, old enough to be her father. No duplex penthouse on Sutton Place, but a two-room cold-water dump off Canal Street. No bank account. Just a bunch of pawn-tickets. But she's here in the big city without a dime or a job or a place to sleep. And she said she'd marry you, and according to her idea that means she ought to do it. Anyway, she doesn't know what else to do, and you're so mushy about her that she hates to disappoint you."

Dodd stopped to pour himself another drink.

"She didn't know that she's just what New York's been looking for. She didn't know that with her blond curls and big scared eyes and her shape all she needed to do was just sign the register at the Waldorf and drop her handkerchief, and she could have herself a dinner at the Stork Club, and a penthouse in fifteen minutes. No, she had come to marry George Horace Gribby, and she went down to City Hall with you, and did it.

"She was scared of you," he added, his dark eyes burning and his mouth ugly. "But she didn't know that you, besides being just a washed-out hack, were the sort of bird who would be jealous of her if she so much as spoke to the corner fruit peddler.

"So she married you, and tried to make a go of it. When she realized how poor you were, she thought of getting herself an office job. But you couldn't bear having her in places where you couldn't watch her, and meeting other men. You'd rather keep her in your dingy flat with the broken-sprung furniture and the linoleum on the floor and the cockroaches and the rats, while you pounded out

your screwball stories. Let her live on love and cold potatoes with you, and like it.

"Then you take her out to a party that you happen to get invited to, and everybody there gives her a rush. Including me, I don't deny it. And you've been imagining crazy things in your head ever since. So maybe she goes out to buy some groceries this afternoon, and because she doesn't come back in half an hour you imagine that I've lured her up to my place to do some typing, and that I want to make her. So you come hot-footing here and ring my bell for fourteen steady minutes."

He drained his glass again and set it down on the bar top with a bump. He moved out from behind the bar.

"You just wanted to discuss the plot of a murder story with me," he said. "All right, you're in. Go ahead and use your rheumy old eyes. Here!"

He had stridden to the bathroom door. He pushed it open.

"She isn't here," he said. He stepped to the kitchenette door and kicked it open

"She isn't here," he repeated. He turned the knob of the closet door and jerked it open.

"Two topcoats and eight suits," he said, pushing them aside on the hanger-rod. "Anybody would be a damned fool to hide in a closet with the door shut tight and smother. You can see the back of the closet. She isn't here, either.

"She isn't behind the divan or the radio. There isn't anybody here except me, and Shah, my cat. Greta never was in my apartment. I haven't seen her since last Friday evening about ten-fifteen, when I lugged you up two flights of creaking rotten stairs and dumped you on your bed in the back room of your little flat, and tipped my hat to her and left."

"You stayed to help her get me undressed and into bed," said George Gribby in his high-pitched whisper.

"Sure, I stayed and did that much for you," admitted Evans Dodd. "Your clothes stank on you. But you don't remember that I did. You just guessed."

"You stayed on in the living-room with her after you got me to bed," said George Gribby in his thin voice, swallowing. "I heard the springs of the couch creaking, and the two of you whispering and laughing together, and then no

sound at all I got up and tried the door, but it was locked. You had locked me in while you were out there with her."

Evans Dodd turned to his bar again. He picked up the bottle and tilted it over the jigger-glass, draining the last drop.

"You lie," he said "You were dead drunk, Gribby. You never woke up till morning."

"You had made an engagement with her to meet her at lunch the next day," said George Gribby, his mouth working nervously. "You told her you wanted to talk to her about doing some typing for you. I heard the two of you talking about it at the party after you thought I had passed out."

"Well," said Evans Dodd, "what of it? She stood me up at lunch. I didn't know what a crazy old goon you were. So crazy jealous that you'd even forbid her to have lunch with me. I haven't seen her since last Friday. No one has been here all afternoon."

"Your word of honor, Mr. Dodd?" asked George Gribby in his childish whisper.

"God, yes!" said Evans Dodd with ironical contempt. "Honor bright. Cross my fingers and hope to die. What's the difference between a word of honor and just a plain word, except that the latter gets you two more cents? She's never been here. Now get on your velocipede and go. Before I forget the consequences of manslaughter and break your damned neck."

GEORGE GRIBBY was still standing in the middle of the golden rug, with his frayed cigarette stub burning between his loose lips. His red-clotted eyes had been wandering hazily about him, trying to pick up something. But he himself hadn't moved.

At last the cigarette burned down and he lurched to the end of the divan and placed the stub in the spun-brass ashtray on its arm.

Evans Dodd downed the half jigger of whisky in his fist. Then he reached over on the bar behind him and picked up the highball glass which he had casually removed from his desk when George Gribby entered. Golden beads still rose slowly in the glass.

He lifted the glass and turned it around before putting it to his mouth. There was a smudge of red lipstick on its

golden rim, as he had seen when he picked it up from his desk. But the brainless old goon must have seen it, too. He had seen it when he stood by the door, humble, persistent, and unavoidable, lurching and rolling his way in. And he had seen the empty glass, too, on the bar top when he came in. Two glasses, in any language, mean two.

Evans Dodd stuck his empty pipe in his mouth, clenching his teeth on the stem. "All right," he said. "So there were two glasses, and one had lipstick on it. All right, maybe I had a lady friend in for a while, getting some inspiration for a story. I admit it. She left just before you arrived. But it wasn't Greta. She's never been here. That's the truth."

"Your word of honor?" said George Gribby in a hoarse whisper.

"God, yes. My word of honor. I really mean it. Damn you, what are you doing?" George Gribby had moved towards the farther end of the divan, towards the dark gold velvet curtain that was drawn over the farther half of the window. He had moved quickly and with complete steadiness. More quickly than Evans Dodd, with the liquor in him, felt the capacity for doing. He had seized the curtain, hanging on its brass wings.

"I thought at first she had ducked through some door," Gribby muttered in his thin voice, his lips twitching. "I heard one jarring shut. That was what confused me, when she wasn't in the kitchenette or closet or bathroom. It must have been just the wind, though. But there was a clank, too. It wasn't the tinkle of the cat's toy. It was a clank. I've been trying to think what it was."

"Maybe this will help you think," said Evans Dodd, hurling the highball glass in his hand.

He hurled it at George Gribby's head, reeling forward. But his aim was wide and uncertain. It missed Gribby by two feet. It hit against the folds of the heavy curtain which George Gribby was jerking back in a scrawny hand.

"Come out!" George Gribby said. "Come out, Greta."

He had hauled the curtain back. The window behind it was open from the bottom. A faint breeze seeped through. Beyond the window was the bare brick wall of a building and twenty feet away. There was a fire-escape

landing outside, with iron stairs zigzagging down two flights to a paved alleyway.

Something flat and round rolled from beneath the edge of the curtain, stopping against George Gribby's frayed shoe. He clutched his briefcase in both hands against his belt, looking down at it with his red-veined eyes.

"You're crazy," blurted Evans Dodd. "She wasn't hiding behind the curtain. She didn't go out that way. That curtain is always drawn, to keep out the view of the blank wall. She—the lady friend I had here—went out the door just before you came. Why should she dodge down a fire-escape from you? Why should anybody dodge down a fire-escape to avoid a crazy, jealous, rotten hack of a man like you? You aren't going home and beat the day-lights out of Greta for being here, when she wasn't. Like you did—like I'll bet you did last Saturday morning after the Blenheim party. Your crazy mind and your stories make me sick. I'm going to break your neck."

He had started towards George Gribby at the window. But his heel got caught in the brass rail, and he tripped forward, sprawling. The liquor was heavy in him. He got up, moved forward again, swaying uncertainly, the muscles of his hands flexing.

George Gribby waited for him in a low crouch. His shoulders were bent. Like a cat's. Like a mangy cat cornered in an alley. He had thrust a hand into the bulging, shapeless briefcase he held, and a corner of the briefcase was pointed at Evans Dodd's burly figure.

HE HAD USED his old shapeless briefcase to carry home bottles, laundry, and potatoes, and alarm clocks and candlesticks to the pawnbroker's, as well as a thousand fantastic stories to the editors. But it wasn't laundry or potatoes in it now, nor anything for the pawnbroker or the editors.

"You're right, Dodd," he said in his high thin voice, taut to the breaking point. "I realize what's been wrong with all my stuff. When you go to kill a man, there's no need to be intricate and fancy. The simplest is always best. I'm just going to shoot you through the heart, Dodd."

"You haven't got a gun in that bag of yours, you crazy old fool!" said Evans Dodd, wavering. "You never owned a gun in your life."

"Haven't you missed your own gun yet?" chided George Gribby. "The gun you sometimes drop in your pocket when you go out on parties, because you may end up in Harlem or a gang joint. I suppose you have a permit for it. I suppose it's registered. You're the sort of big, important, bully-boy realist who stands in with the police. It's some kind of an Italian gun called a Point-nine corto, if you don't think I have it. I found it Saturday morning when I woke up, where you had laid it on the floor of my living room beside the couch with the broken springs. I didn't tell Greta that I'd found it. And I'm going to shoot you smack through your heart with it, Dodd. And then I'm going home and kill Greta."

He held his scrawny fist tightly gripped about the cross-hatched butt of the precision-made, beautifully tooled gun in his briefcase, with its short blunt muzzle pointed through the leather at Evans Dodd. It was called a double-action automatic—he had read up on it—which could shoot one bullet or shoot seven, just by putting the safety catch down and pointing it at a man like one's finger, and squeezing the trigger. He had read up on it since Saturday at the public library, where all hack writers go to learn about reality and life.

Fantasies. He had lived his whole life in a world of fantasies. Child and boy and man, for fifty years, a world of dreams. But this was real. He was going to kill this smooth, strong, handsome man with his smooth skin and smooth black hair, with his big confident booming voice and ironic smile. With hip mouth, his black crisp mustache, which had kissed Greta.

Greta, so young and beautiful. Nine months of exchanging letters with her, three months of living with her. He had loved her so much. He had never loved a woman before, except his mother. She had seemed like child and wife and mother to him, all in one.

He had not thought of himself as being any older than she was. His heart was still so young.

But she had betrayed him. She had torn it all, with this smooth, successful ironic man. And he was going to kill him. Evans Dodd. This was real. This was life. And it would be death. He was going to kill him. And then he was going home and kill Greta, his golden little love.

The tears were in his blurred eyes. His lips were trembling. But his scrawny hand on the gun-butt inside his briefcase was firm. Like pointing a finger.

"Listen!" pleaded Evans Dodd with sweat on his face. "Listen, you crazy fool! Take your hand off that gun! Put it down! You can't do that to me!"

He had paused in his enraged surge towards George Gribby. The ironical twist had left his mouth. His eyes were haggard. He knew that the gun was pointed at him. He knew that this was real.

"Listen!" he said, moving a step forward, his booming voice subdued and wheedling. "Listen, Mr. Gribby! I tell you, Greta—Mrs. Gribby—was never in my place. It was another girl who happened to be here when you rang, and who thought it was her husband. She was—she was Dick Whittington's wife, if you must know. You know Dick Whittington. You would have laughed if you had seen her—she was so scared. It was Mrs. Whittington! So help me, that's the truth! My word of honor."

Sliding forward, as George Gribby had slid into his apartment. Though a terror was in him, and his drunkenness was real. Six feet more to go. Five. The crazy old fool!

George Gribby gave a little push with a frayed shoe to the round flat object on the floor which had rolled out from the folds of the curtain. He did not move his blurred eyes from Evans Dodd.

"I gave it to her," he said in his thin childish whisper. "I bought it at the drugstore for a dollar ninety-eight last Christmas, and sent it to her in Hokesville. The first Christmas present I ever gave a girl." Evans Dodd stared down. It was a woman's compact, about five inches in diameter, made of some plastic imitating tortoise-shell, of a jade-green color. There were large silver initials on it, "G. G."

"Oh. for God's sake!" said Evans Dodd with agony. "If that isn't the limit! Listen! Please listen, Mr. Gribby! So help me, that's not Greta's—Mrs. Gribby's! It belonged to Gwendolyn Gates, the society girl who took the overdose of sleeping tablets last month at her place on Park Avenue! Maybe Mrs. Gribby had one like it—I don't know. But Gwen lost that one the last time she was here. We looked all around for it and couldn't find it! It must have got



caught in the folds of the curtain. It's not Mrs. Gribby's. I swear it!

"Gwendolyn Gates!" he said, with his eyes sweating and his lips cold. "You must have heard of her if you read the newspapers! She was the one who left those notes for me! It was in the papers—'Park Avenue Deb Kills Self for Love of Author'—and all sorts of big headlines like that! Author—that was me! It's Gwen's compact. I wouldn't marry her. That was why she killed herself. Gwendolyn Gates! Funny she should have had the same initials, isn't it? It belonged to her, I swear it! So help me God! My sacred word of hon—

"Oh, don't!"

#### CHAPTER IV

WHAT A SENSELESS way to die, thought Evans Dodd. What a crazy, senseless way to die, with the sun shining in his golden apartment, and life so wonderful. With his book unfinished, and all the money from the movies. Just because of a little blond skirt from Arkansas, who had struck his eye when he had been high. There were a million other blondes. Just because she had this jealous lunatic for a husband. Just because of Gwendolyn Gates' compact. It was so unfair. It was so dreadful. For him, with all life had for him, to die. Oh, don't—

The bullet came out through George Gribby's briefcase as quickly as any bullet comes, which is quicker than anything that flies and quicker than sound, and quicker than thought itself, perhaps. And it struck Evans Dodd in the middle of his broad intelligent ironic forehead where he did his thinking. And so he would never say or write what he felt about it.

And perhaps the soul of Gwendolyn Gates, and other lovely blondes, went rushing to meet him. But that is something that no one will ever know, either. There had been only the one shot. George Gribby hadn't quite known that he had pulled the trigger. In the intensity of the moment, in the blood-roaring that filled his ears, he hardly heard it. But he had felt the gun jerk in his fist inside the briefcase, and there was a blank look in Evans

Dodd's eyes, and something strange about his forehead. And Evans Dodd wasn't talking any more. He was falling.

He lay upon his golden rug, Evans Dodd, in his honey-yellow silk shirt and mustard slacks. He lay on his face, with his hands loose and outstretched. He had ceased to talk, he had ceased to move. He had been unmade, like that, just with a finger pressure. He could never be made again. George Gribby took his numb hand out of the briefcase, the gun still resting against his palm.

He had committed murder. This was reality. This was the way it really happened. In frenzied rage and heat and terror—without thinking.

He stood there with the gun in his hand, looking at Evans Dodd, and looking at the compact on the floor. The silver initials on it seemed to swim and float beneath his vision. Greta's compact had had a crack across it, he remembered, and the tail of one of the "G's" had been broken off, from the time she had dropped it in the subway and it had been stepped on before she could retrieve it.

But the initials on the compact on the floor were quite undamaged, and its case had no crack!

Greta's had been amber, too, it occurred to him a little belatedly, and not jade-green.

Evans Dodd had told the truth. It had belonged to some other woman—what had he said her name was? Greta had never been in his apartment.

He felt a sickness in the pit of his stomach. He looked at the gun in his fist with sudden terror. Gingerly he let it drop to the rug.

He had done murder. He had done it crudely, and without plan—he, who in his fantasies had conceived and carried through a thousand intricate, perfect murders.

Blood was oozing from Evans Dodd's head and seeping into the rug. He listened for the hammering on the door.

Standing there in the silence beside the dead man, he was aware of a hundred sounds which he had heard, and yet not heard before. The continual city roar to which a city dweller's ears become deafened so that it ceases to be. Motor traffic from the street—a constant medley of policemen's whistles. The drone and shuffle on the pavement of ten thousand passing voices and passing feet. A constant rumbling from behind the blank brick wall of the

building across the alley—printing presses or die-stamps, or some other kind of heavy machinery.

There was no one hammering on the door yet.

He hadn't heard the sound of the shot himself, in the intensity of the moment. Muffled in the bag, it had not actually been loud. Perhaps, among the endless roars and clamors of the city, it had not been loud enough to have them noticed by anyone outside the window, or through the walls.

He had done murder. He had done it blindly, without thought of the consequences. As most murders are done.

But now that it was done, he was suddenly and acutely terrified. His mind was racing with thoughts of his own safety. Of how he could avoid the consequences. How he could cover up. As most men who commit murder do—planning belatedly, after the thing is done.

Who had seen him coming to Evans Dodd's apartment? No one on the street would remember him, certainly, among the city's millions. There had been no one in the small swank lobby when he had turned into it. He had come up in the automatic elevator alone. No other door, as it had happened, had opened while he had been out in the hall ringing Evans Dodd's bell. He had not tried to arrive unseen. If he had tried, someone might nevertheless have seen him. But as it had happened, no one had. The only person who might know of his visit at all might be the woman—Mrs. Whittington, or whoever she had been—who had been here with Evans Dodd.

But she might have fled down the fire-escape while he was still outside ringing the bell. Even if she had still been in the apartment, behind the window curtain, when he came in, she could only say that he had visited Evans Dodd. She could not say that he had killed him. And a woman in her situation would not be likely to talk.

He hadn't tried, either, to avoid leaving his fingerprints in the apartment. If Evans Dodd had offered him a drink, he would probably have taken it. Or, if there had been anything to touch, he would have touched it. But—thinking back—there had been nothing he had touched except the bell-push, which would show no individual fingerprints, and the gun itself. He had not even touched the ashtray when he laid down his cigaret butt. The butt itself was burned to white ash. It would show no prints.

IF HE HAD planned to, something unforeseen might have intervened. But it had just happened that he had not been seen. That the shot had not been heard. That he had left no trace of his presence.

He took out his handkerchief and, picking up the gun in it, he wiped it off carefully. Holding it in the cloth, he pressed the butt and trigger-grip against the fingers of Evans Dodd's right hand. He laid it on the golden rug three feet away, where it would have fallen from a collapsing suicide's outflung hand. He stood up, then, putting his handkerchief back in his pocket.

Evans Dodd's own gun. And Evans Dodd lying dead on his golden rug. It might have been a scene from one of his own sexy, sophisticated best sellers. With the compact which had belonged to Gwendolyn Gates, the recent suicide, beside him on the floor, to give a reason for it.

With his flat briefcase beneath his arm. the bullet-punctured side towards him, George Gribby stepped over the window-ledge onto the fire-escape, and went down it. The window on the first floor below was painted over. That on the ground floor was boarded up. There was only the blank wall opposite. He went down along the alley, unseen, and mingled unobtrusively with the crowds on the sidewalk at the alley end, going towards the subway kiosk at the corner, and down the stairs.

A shabby man with thin rumpled gray hair, with a pointed pixie face, with a vague childish look in his blood-shot light-blue eyes, sitting patiently on a subway bench with a shapeless briefcase on his knees. An easily recognizable sight in any magazine reception-room, a writing hack waiting patiently for some harassed assistant editor to come out and listen to him narrate the plot of the latest fantastic murder story he had done. But no one in this world would ever know that he had done a real murder.

He got out at Canal Street and walked towards the tenement where he had lived these last fourteen years. He went up the creaky wooden stairs to his dingy two-room rat-hole in the back. Greta was in the dingy little kitchen, Greta, with her little frilled apron on. With her blonde curls damp in the steam of boiling cabbage and potatoes on the two-burner gas plate.

"Hello, love," he said with a wrinkled smile, pausing in the kitchen doorway, "I had to go to the library to look up

something about the head-hunting Jibberauts of South America. I hope you weren't worried to find me gone when you came back."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, no. That was where I supposed you were."

SHE LIFTED the lid off a pot and stirred it, her face pink in the steam, her eyes averted from him.

She was afraid of him, he thought. He had never considered before just how much she was afraid of him. She was really so very young. He should treat her with more kindness. He shouldn't have beaten her last Saturday morning.

Still, there was a certain satisfaction in having her afraid of him. It gave him a feeling of power.

He had stopped that business about Evans Dodd quickly. There would be no more of him.

"Cabbage and potatoes, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands. "My favorite dish. Well, next week we'll have round steak, as a treat for you, if Mr. Mulligan buys that story I'm doing. I've told you about it, haven't I? There's a man who has—"

"Oh!" she said, wringing her hand. "The pot lid's hot. What was it, George? Some one of your murder stories? Couldn't you tell me about it at dinner, dear? It's almost ready. Hadn't you better get cleaned up?"

"Yes, love," he said.

He went into the little bathroom and washed his hands. He rubbed his bristled cheeks in front of the distorted mirror.

He should treat her more kindly. Her life was really quite meager and bare. He hadn't bought her any clothes at all. He hadn't taken her out to dinner once, or given her any social life at all, except last Friday at Magnificent's big party at the Blenheim; and that had been free.

There was so little money. He himself had his wonderful dreams, for his own satisfaction. They were a morphia and an anodyne. But she needed something more. He should remember that she was younger than he was, and therefore treat her more tenderly. She shouldn't be so much afraid of him.

He took his electric razor out of the cabinet behind the mirror. He soaped his hands, then briskly washed his

face. There might have been the germ of a plot in that bit of murder business which he had spun out extemporaneously for Evans Dodd while he had been looking around him, he thought. There's a man who has an electric razor, and he washes his face and with his hands still wet—He turned the faucet off and reached up to the cord above him to steady it with his wet hand before plugging the razor in, with his other hand still on the faucet handle . . .

Greta Gribby heard his body fall, with her hands pressed against her cheeks. It had happened just as he had said. After a while she would go in, and find him, and scream.



# TWO DEATHS HAVE I

## CHAPTER ONE

### Young Man's Fancy

I DON'T KNOW just why she wrote the story. She wasn't a writer, or even much of a reader, I suppose, with her red lips and her dark eyes of night. It couldn't make any difference to Koppelman whether anybody thought he had drowned that quietly beautiful blonde woman deliberately that moonless night or not—that woman who came with them, who took care of the boy, whose name I never knew. It couldn't make much difference to her, either, it would seem.

Even if she had been a better storyteller than she was, she couldn't prove Koppelman hadn't, anyway. And using different names and a little different location, as she did, it would seem that she hadn't expected anyone to know whom it was about. She couldn't think of my reading it, if she remembered me at all, or anyone else who had known her and Koppelman.

Maybe it was just something she had to tell. Or maybe she had only written it for the five hundred bucks which *True Murder Romances* paid for contributions, plus a chance at the big ten-thousand-dollar prize for the best story of the year, which might offer her freedom and escape.

She had won the prize, anyway. And there her story was in the new October issue that Mr. Rutherford tossed across his desk to me, for me to dramatize to the great invisible radio audience.

"Good morning, Beaman. Did you have a pleasant time on your vacation?" Mr. Rutherford asks me kindly, not caring, as I sway into his office. "Where did you go? What did you do? Did you take Mrs. Young with you? And your—ah—your offspring? Did they enjoy it, too?"

He tosses the shiny magazine he has been fondly looking through across his desk at me as I slump to a seat.

"Yeah," I tell him. "Wonderful. I took Mrs. Young and the twins up to spend the month with my uncle, who's a



bachelor and the sheriff of Allen County up at Big Moose Lake Landing, way to hell and gone in Maine. It was a wonderful year for blackflies and mosquitoes on the lake. A refreshing rain poured down steadily for a week. I got a concussion the first day diving off onto a submerged log, and broke my wrist the fourth day cranking my uncle's outboard motor for him. Mrs. Young went blueberrying and got the most beautiful case of poison ivy you ever saw, complete from head to toe."

"Fine. Fine." says Mr. Rutherford. "I envy you. Nothing like a wife and kiddies to make life seem worth while. Glad you came back refreshed and in the pink, all raring to get in there and pitch.

"You've already seen our latest issue, out last week, no doubt," he tells me with fat, pink fondness, "containing the T.M.R. prize story, 'Was My Husband a Murderer?' by Vilena Lamarre. A stark, powerful, gripping drama," he intones, with his pink jowls jiggling and a quiver in his voice, "written from the depths of a woman's soul-searing experiences, a—uh—"

"A slice of human life," I say, "poignant and unforgettable."

"A slice of human life," he says, "poignant and unforgettable. Right."

That's the sponsor's plug which begins each *True Murder Romances* Hour, dramatizing a story every Monday night from half past eight to nine over the Consolidated Network for the great invisible radio audience. I ought to know it. I've listened to it for eighty-seven broadcasts in the sound-booth, and twice that for rehearsals; and I wrote it. Not to speak of the eighty-seven scripts, plus five that I left all ready for the air before I went away.

I'm in the radio-script department of Shea and Healy, who handle the T.M.R. account, and Mr. Rutherford is the mag's editor.

I don't know anybody besides Mr. Rutherford who reads *True Murder Romances* except my uncle, who runs the general store up there at Big Moose Lake Landing, rents rowboats and canoes, and poses for amateur photographers of quaint native types during the two months of the summer season.

Still, other people must read it, because it has a circulation of a million eight hundred thousand copies, which

gives Mr. Rutherford his bleached mahogany desk and etchings and his soft, white rugs and chromium bar up here at the top of Rockefeller Center, looking out from the farthest reaches of East Brooklyn to the blue swamps of Hackensack, New Jersey; and gives Shea and Healy three-quarters of a million bucks a year for advertising budget, and me the hundred and twenty-five a week which pays for the twins' diapers and milk, and the other overhead of Ruth's and my little love nest in the Bronx. . .

I HAVE A low feeling in my bones. "Who's Vilena?" I say, opening the book gingerly. "Nelson?"

"No," says Mr. Rutherford, pleased and pink. "It's strictly an amateur story, Beaman, which came in through the mails. All our stories are based on fact, of course," he adds a little hastily, "though naturally they have to be somewhat interpreted by our stable of professional writers in many instances. Miss Lamarre is definitely an amateur, however, by the simplicity of her style.

"She is a young widow, apparently, with an eight-year-old boy," he says, taking a cigar from his silver box and lighting it. "She gave as return address a box number in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Her entry came in at the last minute, when we had practically decided to give the prize to J. Worthington Jeffries, Jr., the high school student's story for which you wrote the script before you went away."

"Did she send her picture with it?" I say meekly.

"Why, how did you know that?" he says. "You're right in there, Beaman. That was what convinced me she was an amateur. Naturally professional writers don't send their pictures with their contributions. I don't know what we'd publish if they did. It was a naïve gesture, but genuine.

"The reason I left an imperative message to see you the moment you returned," he goes on, "is that we are making a little ceremony of presenting the prize check. A little cocktail party in our offices this afternoon for the critics and book reviewers and general run of literary hangers-on, with resulting publicity, we trust. Miss Lamarre has been invited to attend at T.M.R.'s expense, and has accepted. Drop up yourself for a highball and canape, by the way, if you can. In view of the added publicity to be ob-

tained by tying up the prize presentation with the *True Murder Romances* Hour tonight, we have decided—"

"To yank the script of Jeff's story that was scheduled, and put Vilena on."

"Right," says Mr. Rutherford, putting down with a relieved air the antique Sicilian-dagger paper cutter which he had picked up from his desk. "Glad you enter into the spirit of it so eagerly, Beaman. You will find it a story in natural dramatic form," he adds confidently, "which can be put on the air with hardly any alteration. Just pick out the high scenes. In fact, the actors could probably read the dialogue as it stands, even without a script."

"Yeah," I say.

I look at my wristwatch, and it is ten minutes after noon. I have been driving from six A.M., with the twins howling, and there is a roaring in my ears and spots before my eyes. In the next eight hours and twenty minutes I've got to read Vilena's story and write a script of it from scratch, try it out, redraft it, try it out again for timing, give it a final rehearsal, and stand ready to put it on at half past eight at the bell for *True Murder Romances* thirteen million devoted listeners. I can always take three hours off for lunch, of course, and four hours for cocktails with Vilena. But what do I do with the rest of my time today? I open the mag.

"*I waked up at midnight*," it starts off.

I waked up at midnight to give my baby his bottle. I realized that my husband hadn't yet come to bed. I stood at the window a few minutes looking out at the moonless darkness, listening to the lapping of the lake water on the pier float down by the boathouse. Somewhere on the black shore I heard an owl cry, or perhaps it was a loon out over the water. In all the world that single cry, and the water lapping, were the only sounds. I felt a sense of tension and uneasiness—I didn't know of what.

She had something. A feeling for atmosphere. I looked back at the title of the story and her name again. I read the first sentence over, and then went on.

I put on slacks and a turtleneck sweater and a pair of loafers, without bothering to turn on the light, and went to the room of our maid Hilda, back by the kitchen, to get her to feed the baby while I went looking for Charles. But she wasn't there, and her bed hadn't been slept in. Then I remembered that she had expressed a desire at various times to go canoeing, and Charles had told her—more or less jocosely, as I had thought—that some dark night he would take her for a ride.

I left the silent house, and went down onto the boat-house float a hundred feet away. The canoe which we had rented with the cabin was missing. I stood looking out at the blackness of the water, straining my ears. There was no sound of voices, but after a while I heard what sounded like the drip of a paddle approaching, over the smooth, dead black water. I was filled with terror. I felt, with a sixth sense—I *felt*, though I could not see—that whoever was coming was alone.

"Charles!" I said. "*Did she drown?*"

It had me. I'll admit it had me. I don't mean that the writing was anything particular. No deft professional touches or literary words. Just plain and simple factual statements. Like Vilena was telling something that she had to tell, and that you must believe, in answer to your questions. I could almost see her, in her white turtleneck sweater, with her large eyes straining at the darkness through which that dripping blade was coming towards her, down by the edge of the dead black water on the float.

The reason I asked the spontaneous question was that Charles could swim, and Hilda could not. Charles was extremely nervous, due to his war experiences, and it occurred to me that in his condition he might have accidentally overturned the canoe, and been unable to save her. It did not occur to me that it had been anything intentional. Charles was too much of a gentleman—in a way he was too weak—to be a murderer . . .

I had first met Charles in London in the fall of 1940, a year before. He had been driving ambulances for the French, and had been through Dunkirk, and was badly war-shocked. I myself was a Belgian refugee, all my

people killed, working in a hospital. It had been love at first sight between us, and we had been married after a month.

His wealthy and snobbish family over in America had resented our marriage because I belonged to a different religion, as he had told them in his cable announcing it. They had written him that they would not receive me. Consequently, when we returned to America a year later, when our baby was three months old, we had not gone to his home, but had taken this cabin up in New Hampshire, as a place to live quietly while Charles recovered from his war-shock and decided on his future.

It was autumn, after the season had ended, and we were the only residents on the lake, except for an old native and his half-grown nephew who lived on the opposite side, where they operated the country store from which we obtained our supplies. We had brought only the one servant, Hilda, with us—a big, blonde, rather stupid woman, whom we had engaged in Boston, where we had landed. In the simple atmosphere, shut off by ourselves, we had fallen into rather informal ways of living, allowing Hilda to occupy the living-room with us in the evenings, occasionally playing three-handed bridge together, and even eating our meals together. We treated her to an extent as a member of the family—in other words, not insisting that she keep her place.

It was inevitable, of course, that she would take advantage of it. I remember having noticed at times that she even addressed or referred to Charles by his first name. But while I naturally did not approve, it seemed a slight thing, hardly worth reprimanding her for, nor for their occasionally taking walks together along the lake shore. It did not occur to me that she might have developed a secret infatuation for Charles, and even less that he might have been so weak and neurotic as to yield to her crude animal charms, even for a single occasion.

Still, their absence together in the night, and the absence of the canoe, had made me uneasy and concerned. And when I heard the drip of the blade approaching over the black water, I had a feeling that something terrible had happened.

"Charles!" I said. "*Did she drown? Did she drown?*"

It sounded almost real, and eight years had rolled away from me, and I was a kid of seventeen spending the autumn with my uncle, and rowing on the black water and diving for the drowned woman, and fighting with that hysterical, sobbing guy Koppelman to save his life, and having Mrs. Koppelman's kisses warm and fervent on my mouth.

God, she was a beautiful, black-haired woman, and the first woman that I ever kissed. And a boy can grow to be a man and still remember that, and remember it all his life, even though there'll never be another woman but Ruth now that I'll ever look at any more.

I was seventeen again. I was there, and I was in it. Because, except that the scene of the story was a lake in New Hampshire and not Big Moose Lake in Maine, and except that the people in it were named Charles and Vilena Lamarre like that, and the maid named Hilda, it was the Koppelmans almost to the life.

Calvin and Catherine Koppelman, I think their names were, though he always called her kitten. Nobody knew what the maid's name was, until Mrs. Koppelman gave it for her death certificate as Mabel Clane, which was the name she had been listed under at the agency where the Koppelmans had hired her in Boston four weeks before she died. I don't think it was ever learned where she had come from originally. She had left home, probably, and changed her name, like a lot of girls in domestic service do. Nobody ever turned up to claim her body, and nobody ever missed her much, I guess.

Catherine Koppelman, if that was her name.

I had never called her anything but Mrs. Koppelman. She was only four or five years older than I was, twenty-one or twenty-two, but wiser by all the world; or so she had seemed to me, at the age I was then.

Mr. and Mrs. Koppelman of Ellinville, Pennsylvania, and their nursemaid, who had the Tawney cottage eight years ago up on Big Moose Lake, way to hell and gone in Maine. . .

I REMEMBERED the night they first arrived. It was a pouring night towards the end of September, and I was help-

ing my uncle close his store. The lights of their station wagon turned in, and the car slushed to a stop outside.

"City people," my uncle said, peering out over his glasses. "Wonder where they can be heading for? Better put your slicker on, Bud, and see if they want gas." The driver was already getting out, though. He came up onto the store porch beneath the eave pour, and pushed inside. He was a tall, spindly man in his late twenties, wearing a belted raincoat, with his blond hair hatless. He had a bony face and a hawk nose, and a kind of chinless mouth, and uneasy, light blue eyes.

"Is this Big Moose Lake Landing?" he said.

Only that wasn't the way he said it. He had the most awful way of stammering. He twisted up his face, wiping the rain from it with a handkerchief, with his mouth stretching in a hideous grin and the muscles of his neck like cords, getting out the words syllable by syllable, with a kind of drenched agony in his eyes. The sounds he really made were something like: "Is this bub-bub-Big! Muh-muh-Moose! Lul-lul-Lake! Lul-Landing?"

There is nothing funny about stammering when it's as bad as his was. It makes you ache to listen to it and it is painful even to remember. Because we were strangers to him maybe he was a little worse than ordinary. But he was still pretty bad, even after we had got used to him. I'll just say that he stammered in the most awful way with everything he said, and let it go at that.

"That's what we claim to be," said my uncle, pained. "What can I do for you?"

"Koppelman," he got it out. "Friend of Bill Tawney's of Philadelphia. Called Bill up from Boston yesterday, where Mrs. Koppelman and I had landed. Looking for a quiet place to stay for a while. Bill offered us his cottage up here. Told me to get the key from you. I'm a little nervous," he added, twisting his mouth in his death's head grin.

My uncle opened his rolltop desk and fished around in the key drawer till he found the one tagged "Tawney."

"Finest season of the year," he said. "Blackflies gone. Lake water still warm and turning over. Woods all full of color. Danged fools all leave the end of August, never could see why. We're having a mite of rain now, but it'll clear away by morning, and we'll have a fine bright spell.

How long you and Mrs. Koppelman plan on staying, Mr. Koppelman?"

Koppelman opened his mouth again, with his face contorted.

"Perhaps till after Thanksgiving, unless the pater and mater ask us home for it. They've always made a big thing of it. They might want us to be with them."

"Yep. I should think that anybody would want their folks with them for Thanksgiving, Mr. Koppelman. We make a kind of big thing of it down here in Maine, too. You come from Philadelphia?"

"Ellinville, near Pottstown," Koppelman stammered. "I've been across the past two years, though. It's Mrs. Koppelman's first visit to the States. She was born in Belgium."

"Tawney's cabin is around on the other side of the lake," my uncle said. "End of the road that goes around. Were you aiming on staying there tonight?"

"We didn't find any tourists cabins that were open," Koppelman got out.

"No," said my uncle. "There sure isn't any place. I might put you up in my quarters above the store tonight, with Bud here bunking in with me, if it was just a couple of men of you. Never had any woman staying beneath my roof before."

"Kuk-kind of you to think of it," Koppelman said. "But I'm afraid there are too many of us. We have the baby, and the nurse we got him in Boston."

His ears had reddened, for no apparent reason.

"Most domestics don't care for the country," he said. "We were fortunate to get her. Mrs. Koppelman needs some help. She's not so strong."

"Yep, I reckon," my uncle said. "They aren't today what their mothers were. Paint and cigarettes."

"Guess you can make out all right when you get there. Windows are boarded up, but not much to take them off again. Guess there are plenty of sheets and blankets. Fireplace wood on the back porch, and kerosene for the kitchen stove and the heater in the drum. It's about seven miles around, counting the twists and turns of the road. Only about two miles across the lake, though. You could leave your car here and I could take you over in my power boat maybe a whole lot quicker, only its motor isn't



working and it's got a hole in it and is kind of sunk. There's a canoe Tawney's got in his boathouse, anyway, and maybe an outboard motor, I don't know. You can putt or paddle over for your supplies after you get to living there. That's what most everybody does when they're here on the lake. Guess Bud had better take my car and lead you the way tonight.

"You'll want some supplies to take along with you," he added, going behind his grocery counter. "There'll be some canned goods in the house, and flour and sugar, most likely. But, let's see, you'll want milk and eggs to start off with, and coffee."

"Yes. Whatever you think of," Koppelman got out.

"Butter. Bread. Seen plenty of the war over there, I reckon," my uncle said, making out a list on the back of a sack, and estimating in his mind what unexpected business he might be having while they were up.

"I was in it," Koppelman managed, with his face contorted. "Drove an ambulance. With the French. The pater and mater didn't want me to go, but I was twenty-five. A man has got to stand up for his rights."

"He sure has," my uncle said sympathetically. "Some parents are downright bossy. There was a fellow I used to know when I was a little shaver. His parents had always been real strict with him. He wasn't anything like so bad as you, but even so it made you plumb ache to listen— I mean he was kind of nervous, too. He used to go with my Aunt Nellie. His parents never would let him get married, though. How come yours did?"

"We were married in London," he said. "They didn't like it. They thought that I should wait till I was thirty-five. You'd think I had committed some awful crime. What made it a hundred times worse to them was Mrs. Koppelman's religion. They are awfully strong in theirs. They wrote me that they disowned me and that I was dead to them, when I cabled them. They've sent back every letter I've written them. They've been just fierce."

"I've got prunes and shortening down," my uncle said. "You'll need some maple syrup if you like pancakes. We've got some nice jars of olives if you like that sort of stuff. We lay in some right fancy goods for the summer people. Have you anything in mind?"

"Perhaps I'd better ask Mrs. Koppelman."

"Yep," said my uncle with a sigh. "You can't even buy groceries without asking 'em, it seems like, if you're married. Bud," he told me, "step out and tell Mrs. Koppelman her husband wants her to come in, if she doesn't mind."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sound and Fury

THAT'S HOW I come to first meet her. The rain had sort of slacked away. I went out, down off the porch, and she was just getting out of the station wagon in the light from the store. She was wearing one of these transparent red raincoats with a hood. She was little, with the blackest hair and the reddest lips. Her eyes were a dark blue, with long black lashes curly from the dampness. The color of the eyes of night, I remember the words came to me as she looked at me.

(It was the first advertising slogan I ever thought of. I used it with the Duffee account a couple of years ago, which was where I met Ruth. They put a million dollars into a campaign built around it, and jumped their gross sales ten million dollars. They are still using it.)

"Mr. Koppelman wants you," I told her awkwardly.

It seemed to me that I stammered it. Mr. Kuk-kuk-kuk. Wuh-wuh-wuh-wants. Listening to a man who does it in that awful way will make you want to do it yourself, unless you watch. Though probably I didn't, really.

"Wants me?" she said. She had a baby's milk-bottle held against her coat.

"My uncle thought you might need some supplies to take along," I explained. "Mr. Koppelman wanted you to help him pick them out."

"I was just going in to heat the bottle," she said.

She went up onto the porch and in through the door. I saw my uncle run his hand across his bald head and feel his collar button as she went towards him and Koppelman at the counter.

"Did you want me?" she said.

"Kuk-kuk-kuk!" Koppelman said, looking around at her. "Kuk-kuk-kitten!"

My uncle rubbed his bald pate again, and said, "I've got milk and eggs and butter, and—"

Then the door closed with its automatic closer.

I didn't go back in with her. I wanted to get a little breath of the cool rainy night into my lungs. I could feel my blood pounding. It wasn't right to be only seventeen. And what did that bony stammering loon have that I didn't have, except about ten years and maybe a million dollars?

There was a kind of "*Wa-wa! Wa-wa!*" sound inside the station wagon. I hadn't had the twins then—I wasn't baby-conscious. It sort of startled me. I looked in through the car window.

There was this blonde woman sitting in the corner of the back seat. She smiled at me, as if she realized that I had been startled, and it amused her. She turned on the overhead light.

"Alfred," she said. "The baby. It is getting about his feeding time. They always know."

She had a kind of placidly smiling face, with a broad, smooth brow, and a white kerchief tied over her yellow hair. Her eyes were brown, and rather wide apart. You always notice brown eyes particularly with a blonde.

I never knew what her name was, or anything about her, except that Koppelman had mentioned having picked her up in Boston. It was one of the few times—perhaps the only time—that I ever talked to her at all. It was the nearest I ever was to her, standing at the car window that rainy night they came, until the night I was diving for her in the lake. Still I remember her quiet look, and the few words we exchanged.

The principal thing about her was that she was restful. I suppose it was that about her that had got Koppelman. Maybe he didn't even care if she was beautiful. There is one kind of woman who gets a man at first sight, just by the way she walks and throws her eyes. But there is another kind whose effect may be slower, but who holds him when she's got him. I guess she was that kind.

"Yes, ma'm," I said. "I guess that's right. Are you the nurse?"

"Yes," she smiled at me. "Did Mr. Koppelman say I was, or do I just look it? Are you the grocery clerk?"

"No," I said. "I'm just up here visiting my uncle till I get called into the army. I come from East Orange, just outside New York."

"You aren't the native then?" she smiled.

"No'm," I said. "That's my uncle. A lot of summer people call him that. Though he isn't a native, really, either. He was born in Portland."

I didn't know just what to talk about to her. I didn't know anything about Boston, except that I would have liked to have gone to Harvard if it hadn't been for the war; and she had never been in East Orange, I guessed. I didn't know anything about babies, to be able to talk about them. "My uncle has the key," I told her. "It's only a few miles around the lake. I'll lead you to it. Mr. Koppelman is just getting some supplies."

"I'll be glad when we get there," she said. "It has been a long drive."

The baby was in a canvas cradle hooked on the back of the front seat. (We have two now for the twins.) It was sucking its fists, with its eyes closed, sort of squirming its head from side to side. It gave that plaintive "Wa-wa!" sound again.

"Is it a boy?" I said. "It sounds sort of sick."

"He's just waking up," she said. "Wait till he really does, if his bottle isn't ready. I suppose I might as well change him now."

She leaned forward, and unloosed the buckles of his straps. She picked him up expertly and laid him face down on her lap. She reached for a stack of something white on the rear seat ledge behind her, quite unconcerned. Diapers.

"I'll show you the way," I said again, backing away.

I backed my uncle's pick-up truck out of the shed in the rear, and drove it around in front, ahead of the station-wagon. I went into the store again, and helped stow the stuff they had bought into cartons, before taking it out. There is a lot that a woman thinks of to buy that a man doesn't, paper kitchen-towels and all kinds of bathroom and laundry soaps, and things like that, as well as fancy eatables. They had put in a good order, more than thirty dollars worth, just to start off.

There was the pad of telegraph-blanks we had on the counter for the convenience of customers, if they wanted

to leave a wire for my uncle to phone in to Moose Lake Junction when the operator there came on duty at six in the morning; and when Koppelman had stammered out the question, of what they were for, he wrote a telegram off.

It was to William C. Tawney, Locust Hill Road, Germantown. I phoned it in the next morning to Moose Lake Junction, spelling out the names for the railroad telegrapher there:

"Catherine and I arrived with baby safely Big Moose Lake Landing ten p.m. after four hundred fifty mile drive somewhat fatigued but happy and secured key from store. Stop. Looking forward to restful sojourn. Stop. Secured excellent nursemaid Boston competent with infant and willing to assist Catherine in household chores. Stop. Raining at present but fair weather promised for tomorrow. Stop. Lake still warm so shall probably have swimming as well as canoeing. Stop. For the rest will devour your library. Stop. Regards.

Calvin."

He didn't even bother to go over it and cut out the unnecessary words. There wasn't anything in his telegram which required a reply; and Mr. Tawney never did get around to writing him while they were there, I think. I just remember the telegram because it was how I learned her real name was Catherine, and what his first name was.

She had warmed the baby's bottle and taken it out to the nurse in the station wagon while I had been getting the truck out, and had come back in. She had a hand linked through his left arm while he wrote, nestled again him.

" 'Fatigued but happy,' " she read with a little laugh. " 'Looking forward to restful sojourn. Excellent nursemaid. Swimming and canoeing.' Oh, it's going to be wonderful, isn't it, Calvin?" she said a little breathlessly.

He made only the littlest gesture to pull away from her.

"Yuh-yuh-yuh," he said. "Yes. It ought to be all right, kuk-kuk-kitten."

He loved her, all right. A man couldn't help it. He was just weak. He loved that placidly beautiful blonde woman

out in the station-wagon, too, who was feeding his baby now, with its wails stopped. And that is a misfortune for any man, to love two women.

I drove the pick-up ahead of them, slowly, along the rocky winding road around the lake, with their bumping headlights following me in the rain. We drove up to Tawney's cabin around on the other side in half an hour, and I helped Koppelman unhook the weather door and unlock the door, and found the fuse-box for him in the front hall and put the fuses in, and turned on some lights. I went down in the basement and turned on the electric pump, listening to the tank begin to fill up, because the first thing women want when they get in a house is plumbing.

I brought the groceries from the truck into the kitchen, and after I had done that I helped Koppelman carry in the last of their bags from the station wagon. They had a load of them on the tailboard under a tarpaulin, mostly expensive leather and striped airplane stuff, except one cheap cardboard suitcase that I guessed belonged to the blonde nurse. I left the luggage in the hall for Koppelman to distribute where it belonged, because the women were already getting things settled off in the other rooms.

I went outside again, around the house, and unhooked three or four of the winter shutters from the windows. I wouldn't need to get them all off tonight, I figured, just enough to give them some air. It would be easier to get them all off tomorrow in daylight. Then, too, it would give me an excuse for coming back.

It was while I was outside that I re-passed one of the windows where I had taken the shutters off, and saw the nurse inside the room beyond. She had turned on a small bureau light, but hadn't pulled down the shade. I guess she didn't realize that the shutters had been taken off.

It was the Tawney kids' nursery room, and she had put the baby in the crib in it. She was standing beside the crib, looking at a thermometer—to tell whether to put another blanket on or take one off, I guess. Ruth does it a half dozen times a night now with the twins.

Koppelman came in the door while I was standing there outside, and went to the crib beside her.

"Little fellow all right?" he said.

"Yes," she answered.

"He's got his mother's eyes, all right," he said. "Funny little animal."

He put a finger under the baby's chin, and bent down and kissed him. He straightened up, and suddenly without a word he put his arms around her, where she stood there beside him, and her arms went up around his neck. They stood there, kissing and rocking, in silence. I stepped back, and tiptoed carefully away.

I guess I was pretty shocked. They were a grown man and woman, and they knew what they wanted, and knew their way around, which made it seem worse.

I got in the truck, started it up noisily, and drove off. . .

MRS. KOPPELMAN came driving around alone in the station wagon the first thing the next morning. The rain had cleared away during the night, and it was a bright, sparkling morning, with the lake as smooth as glass. She had on slacks and a white turtleneck sweater, and a dark blue bandana, matching her eyes, around her head. She wanted some shelf-paper for the kitchen, a diaper pail, and milk. I got them for her while she waited in the car, and then filled her car up with gas.

"Just charge everything," she said, painting her red lips.

I couldn't help remembering the scene I had witnessed through the nursery window. I felt my face get hot.

I wondered if she knew anything, or guessed at all. Or maybe she just didn't care for their nurse, but she had been the only help they could get to come up here in the woods.

It was fine weather all October. The woods' colors hit their prime, and held for a long time. Over across the lake, from around the Tawney cabin, you could sometimes hear the radio in the stillness, or sometimes shouting and laughing when they were swimming off the boat-house float—that must have been just Mr. and Mrs. Koppelman, since the nurse couldn't swim.

He sometimes asked if there was any mail when he came in—the mail for all the places around the lake was left with my uncle. But there wasn't ever any. Mr. Tawney was the only one who knew he was back, I guess, and he was probably waiting to write till he had some word about Koppelman's parents, whether the news about the baby had made some difference to them, or whether they were

still as set against Mrs. Koppelman's religion. And Mrs. Koppelman, of course, having come from over there, with all her family dead, never had or expected any.

I HAD PLENTY to do, helping my uncle take stock and figure up his accounts for the year. And we still had the gas pump open, and I had to service it for an occasional customer. I had my uncle's power-boat to work on, too, to see if I could get it to float and the motor running. Uncle was awfully proud of his power-boat, and always made the occasion to mention it. But so far as I know it had never run, and never even floated. I think that it was just something that had been lying off the wharf when he bought the store up there in 1916; and he had it down in his mind as something valuable, which he would someday salvage, and go roaring and streaking around the lake faster than a cyclone. I worked hard on it, and I did get it calked up, after a fashion, and up out of the mud so that it would float a little, stern down. But the motor was just a bunch of rust, and there was no sense in working on it.

I had a little boat proposition of my own, too, after I had given up the powerboat. The Riddenpath kid from Chicago had had a rowing wherry, a beautiful little mahogany boat with a sliding seat and a pair of racing sculls, which his father had given him for his birthday during the summer. Not quite so fast as a single scull, but a lot worthier; and when you stretch out your arms in one of them to take the water, and bend back with a long sliding pull, and carry forward again, feathering your oars, you can skim along in them, and it's just like music.

Well, the first time the Riddenpath kid had taken that beautiful little boat out, he had driven it onto some submerged rocks forty or fifty feet offshore in front of the Fralley cabin, trying to show off to the Fralley girl, and she had laughed at him; and he had been so mad that he had taken the butt of one of his sculls and had stove a hole in its bottom, and then had banged the scull blade against the rocks and busted it, and had waded away and left it.

The Fralley cabin was only about half a mile away on the road around the lake, and not half that far by water. And after eyeing that boat from my uncle's pier every



time I was down on it, I hadn't been able to stand it any longer.

If I'd written the Riddenpath kid, asking if I could have the use of it, he would not have answered, or would have said no, just to be nasty. I had taken it on myself to repair it, anyway. I had hauled it to shore one day, and up on the grassy bank by the Fralley landing, just below their summerhouse. I had taken the sculls home with me, and spliced the broken blade with copper bands and rivets at my uncle's workbench in the shed. It was good strong wood—western spruce, I guess—and was just split. I made a pretty neat job of it, adding a little weight to the blade, but not-enough to make it clumsy. I put bands to match on the other scull, to make them even.

After that, I had undertaken to repair the hole in the wherry's bottom, going around the road to it in the evenings after supper, while it was still light enough to work. It was beautiful, laminated wood; and it would have taken a cabinet maker with all the tools and materials to have done a first-class job in it. But by tacking canvas over the hole inside and out, and stretching it tight with dope, and painting and varnishing it when the dope had dried, I did a fairly neat job. You might have to look twice to see where the hole was, I mean; and it was water-tight, anyway.

It was the evening I went around to take a final look at it that I saw the Koppelmans again, for the first time in about ten days.

I had taken to being at the workbench out in the shed or back in the storeroom counting supplies when they came over in the mornings. I just hadn't wanted to think of her red lips any more, because it wasn't doing me any good. I knew that I was just a kid, and that there was a war ahead of me, and that there were maybe more important things. So it had been a while since I had seen either of them.

It was the end of twilight. There was some light still in the sky, but it was all dark silver on the lake, and the shore around was black. I was lying sprawled on the bank beside the wherry, rubbing the patch over with my hand, and feeling that the varnish was dry and the canvas tight, inside and out. I remember thinking that I could launch it tomorrow morning. If I had brought the sculls with me, I

could even launch it now, out over the smooth darkling lake, with the sweep of the curved blades like flying, like music. I lay on the grassy bank, beside the dark silver water, in the black shadow of the shore, feeling that boat and loving it.

Then I saw the canoe coming, slowly, quietly drifting down along the shore. Tawney's aluminum canoe that they paddled over in each morning, but dark silver now as the water, and more mysterious and different.

The two of them were in it, sitting side by side amidships. Koppelman lifted his long thin arm, sweeping a sluggish paddle.

"Shall we go up to the summerhouse again, Calvin?" I heard her voice over the water, lazily murmuring. "We must be somewhere near it. We haven't been there for more than a week."

"Whatever you say, kuk-kitten."

"Steer a little to the left then, darling. There's a wharf, it looks like. It must be the place. But there used to be a boat out in the water in front of it, didn't there?"

"All the places are empty, anyway."

"But I love our summerhouse. Oh, Calvin, we've stopped moving! Are we grounded?"

"Ruh-ruh-rocks."

The drifting canoe had stopped out there off shore, on the rocks from which I had rescued the wherry. I saw him put his arms around her and kiss her.

I lay on the black shore, clutching that wherry that I loved. In a minute I began to crawl away. I reached the graveled path beside the summerhouse, where the bare vines grew about the glassed-off windows, with the tiles and dead fountain and cushioned settles all inside. I crept across the small sharp blue stones on my hands and knees, trying not to make them creak. On silent grass again, I got to my feet, and reached the road in long careful strides, and ran down it headlong . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### Death Walks Quietly

I CAME BACK at ten o'clock, two hours later, with the sculls over my shoulder, when my uncle had been snoring for an hour. There was a wildness in me to drive, drive, drive. To smash the world. To rush and get away.

The canoe was gone on the black water. It had left no wake in the black night. Still I could see her red lips, and her eyes like the eyes of night, and the sweep of his arm around her.

I launched the wherry and got into it, putting the sculls in the locks and fastening down the thole-pins over the leather loomguards while I drifted. I put my feet in the laced leather holds. I paddled out past the shore rocks, and then stretched my arms to it, digging in, and hauling back, with the swift bow cutting through the dead smooth black water, headed down the long ten-mile length of the lake, as near as I could judge it without a star. But there was no song in it, and no music. Only a hammering drive to exhaust my muscles and drain my brain.

I didn't know that I was anywhere near the Tawney boathouse. I must have covered the whole lake. I didn't know at all what time it was, though it was midnight, and I had been out two hours.

There was just the imponderable sense I had of shore near me. I rested on my oars, turning my head around. It looked as if I was over on the other side of the lake—the dim whiteness of the Tawney boathouse down by the water's edge; the cabin, dark and quiet up on the shore, could barely be seen.

"Calvin! Did you drown her?"

I held my oars feathered above the water, coasting, while they dripped.

"Calvin! I can hear your paddle! Tell me what happened, Calvin! Did you drown her?"

"It's Bud Young, Mrs. Koppelman," I said.

My port oar had bumped against the float. I had realized I couldn't get away in silence, without speaking to her. She was standing on the float edge in the darkness,

in slacks and a white sweater, straining out. She seemed to clap her wrist up across her mouth, taking a step back.

"Oh!" she said. "What are you doing?"

"I was just out rowing," I said. "Has anything happened, Mrs. Koppelman?"

She breathed quickly for a moment.

"Mr. Koppelman!" she said. "He's out in the canoe—I thought he should be back by now. It's had me worried."

"He's out with your nursemaid, ma'm?" I said.

"Yes! Yes! I don't know why he should have gone out with her! I couldn't imagine—"

"How long have they been out?"

"Why, it must have been hours! I mean we all go to bed early. I just waked up and found them missing, and the canoe gone. I don't know how long ago!"

I had been out two hours myself, and hadn't heard any voices on the water.

Somewhere off over the dead black water, in the velvet night silence, it sounded then, a cry like a loon.

"Huh-huh-huh-huh!"

A watery, thin, inchoate cry, out on the lake, like a crazy, laughing loon.

"Huh-huh-huh-help! Huh-help! Huh-help!"

I pushed off from the float. I drove my blades in, sweeping around.

I laid myself to it. If I was tired, I didn't know it. I dug the blades in and hauled back on them, leaped forward in the slide, and lay back while the looms bent. And the water foaming, riffling off the bow, and sucking away in a boil behind.

"Huh-huh-huh-help!"

I don't know what kind of time I made. It seemed to me that I was making ten yards a second, as fast as a man can sprint. The cry was much nearer. I was headed for it. I was almost on it when I heard it again. In front of my bow, behind me, I felt something loom.

I dug the oars hard in, backing water. The wherry's bow, with way on her, struck something with a bump. An overturned canoe. I let go the oars, letting them drift stern ward against the strakes. I stood up, kicking off my low sneakers, and peeling my pants down and off me with a jerk.

Koppelman's watery head and face came up beside the canoe.

"Huh-huh-huh—She's down there!"

I dived off.

I went down, and found her. Ten feet below the surface, and rolling. My outstretched hand slipped from her cold smooth arm, and then I couldn't find her again. I came thrusting up, sucked air, and dived again. Koppelman was clinging to the canoe and panting as I came up. I felt him going down again as I went down.

I found her again. I got her by the hair this time—those coils of heavy blonde hair. I held to her, though my lungs were bursting, kicking and fighting up through that black, strangling water. I broke surface, pulling her face above it, and reached for the gunwale of the motionlessly drifting wherry. Her eyes were open on the water's surface. But she was cold. She was cold.

I caught the gunwale, and brought her to it. I held to her hair, keeping her face above, while I rolled inward, tearing my chest on the oar-lock. I knelt in the boat, with my hands beneath her armpits, and pulled at her.

Koppelman came up.

"You've got her!" he gasped. "You've got her!"

"She's dead!" I said hysterically. "She's dead! Help me, Mr. Koppelman!"

"She wanted me to!" he gasped. "But I didn't mean to do it! Oh, God, I didn't mean! It was an accident! I was shifting seats! Oh, God, I didn't mean!"

His lips sank below the surface for a moment.

"Oh, blast her!" he gasped. "Oh, Catherine!"

His head went down.

"Help me, Mr. Koppelman!"

But he had gone down, looking for something that she had had, I thought.

I pulled her up across the gunwale, over the wherry's thwarts. I rolled her over on her face, with the oars lying out as outriggers, while the wherry rocked. With her face over the gunwale, I tried to pump her lungs out. But she was very cold.

Koppelman hadn't come up.

Maybe he had been exhausted. But I was exhausted, too. I couldn't go down for him, not right now.

He hadn't stuttered. He hadn't stuttered at all. Just gasping. Beyond fear. Beyond the last fear. He hadn't stuttered to his God. He had gasped God's name, and his wife's, and had said it had been an accident, before God. Then, very quietly, he had gone down.

"Mr. Koppelman! Mr. Koppelman!"

But he didn't come up. There were lights in my uncle's store on the shore in front of me. There were lights in the Tawney cottage on the shore behind me, too. I was in the middle of the black lake.

A flashlight came jagging down to the store wharf. A car drove down onto it, with headlights.

"Bud? Bud?" the faint cry came.

"Drowned!" I croaked. "Drowned!"

But I didn't know if my voice carried at all. I didn't have a flash to signal back where I was.

I sat down and took the oars. Her body lay across the stern in front of me. That placid, beautiful woman, whose name I didn't know, with her deep limbs and yellow braids and her brown eyes staring. I couldn't bend my knees nor stretch my arms far. I pulled in little dips, as fast as I could, for the store wharf, with her arms and legs dragging over the sides.

Maybe I reached the wharf in nine minutes, maybe fifteen, pulling hard. But it wouldn't have made any difference if I had been on shore with her from the first moment. She was very cold when I found her in the water the first time.

My uncle was down on the wharf with some other men, trying to get an outboard started, when I pulled into the headlights of the car that had driven down on it—Dr. Denning from Moose Lake Junction. He had been driving past, on his way home from a delivery down in town, and had seen the store lights on and my uncle's flashlight down on the wharf, and the voices out over the water; and he had stopped, bringing his car down.

We got her out and on the dry planks of the wharf, and took turns pumping at her ribs. But her heart had stopped, Dr. Denning said. If she couldn't swim, she might have died of shock and gasping terror when she first hit the water.

There was a bruise on her forehead. She might have got it when she fell out of the canoe.

There were other men who came, that my uncle had phoned for. There were boats out there all night long. But they didn't find Koppelman's body till morning.

He had gone down deep, and his arm was wedged around a rock.

At some time I remember Mrs. Koppelman being down there on the wharf. Some boat had gone over to get her, or else she had driven around the lake in their station wagon. It was after the body of that beautiful blonde woman who had loved Koppelman, and whom Koppelman had loved, had been carried into the store, before I had finished diving, before I had put on dry clothes or dried my hair. I remember her sobbing, and clinging to me and kissing me. She had the kind of kisses that I had never known before, that make a boy into a man, and that a man can't ever quite forget. But my own lips were cold. They were wet and cold, as cold as Koppelman's were now.

It didn't mean anything. She was just unstrung. She kissed and clung to Dr. Denning, too, and would have to my uncle if he hadn't been so wary, and quicker to dodge than a spider. Dr. Denning told me afterwards, dryly explaining that a natural reaction to death is quite often a blind amorous abandonment, a desire for life as compensation. That it was not the first time a newly-made widow had flung herself upon him, even beside the death-bed, when she realized the finality of it. Nature's way of striking a balance, he said.

All night the boats with lanterns were out on the lake, searching for Koppelman's body. But that beautiful blonde woman who had been drowned with him, or before him, lay in the store beneath a sheet. Nobody knew her name until Mrs. Koppelman told it. Mable Clane.

NOBODY EVER claimed her. She was buried by the county in Sanctus Cemetery, though I think that the Senior Koppelmans, who came up to take their son's body back with them, would have paid for her if the matter had been brought to their attention. They had a million dollars, and they believed in doing the right thing, according to their lights. They took Mrs. Koppelman and the baby back with them when they left, and they were sorry now.

The Koppelmans and their nursemaid, up on Big Moose Lake in Maine, eight years ago. . .

"*They found Charles's body—*" I read on in Vilena's story. . .

They found Charles's body the next day. His hands were torn, as if he had been clinging to the rocks at the lake's bottom. He was a good swimmer, and it might have been that his sensitive and highstrung nature could not endure the thought of having been responsible for Hilda's death, even accidentally.

Her death would certainly have been put down to accident if the local doctor, who served as coroner—a rather dry man with an unemotional nature—had not taken advantage of the windfall of an unclaimed body to perform an uncalled-for autopsy. He determined that Hilda had been about five weeks enceinte. And since that was a little less than the time we had been at the lake, and since there was apparently no other man but Charles with whom she might have consorted—my suggestion of the old storekeeper and his gangling adolescent boy having been dismissed as ridiculous—he was assumed to have been responsible.

I was profoundly shocked. I had been so confident of Charles's complete devotion. His and Hilda's conduct before me had been so circumspect, although the gangling boy did say that on the night of our arrival he had played the peeping Tom and had seen them embracing. Perhaps all wives are stupid that way, and are the last to know what is known to every curious boy.

This provided a possible motive for Charles's having drowned Hilda intentionally, to escape the stigma of having associated with a woman of her class, and also to avoid the hazard of losing my love. It was considered possible that she had played upon his neurotic nature, being a quietly determined woman, and had even demanded that he divorce me and marry her. A man of Charles's nature is easily swayed, and easily driven into a panic of rebellion when forced against his desires. What conflicts went on in his mind, however, were known only to him.

Charles's parents had been notified by wire, and came at once. They were quite wealthy and important, and



refused to countenance any further inquiry into Charles's possible guilt. They were very pleased with the baby; and upon my expressing an interest in their church and inquiring how to become a member of it, they very graciously invited the baby and me to their home, which was necessary since Charles had had no actual money of his own, and had left me quite unprovided for. I have lived with them ever since, in their large mansion in a small town. It is a quiet life, but I go to the movies twice a week, and have the women's clubs. Next year, when Charles would have become thirty-five, a trust fund will become available to the baby and me.

Still the question lies brooding in my mind, even after the years, as I look at the broad shining brow of my boy, with a mother's constant anxiety and affection. Is he the son of a murderer? Or merely of a kind-hearted but weak man who let himself yield to a woman's crude temptation, and then regretted it; but who did not plan, and was himself the victim of, the accident which caused her death?

Well, that's the standard question which ends all *True Murder Romance* stories. I don't know the answer. I think that maybe Koppelman contemplated drowning her, and then got cold feet. And the canoe did overturn accidentally, and with the shock and gasp of water that she took into her lungs she died before he could save her. Or I think that maybe he worked himself up into a neurotic pitch, with the frenzy of a repressed and thwarted boy, and in order not to lose his red-lipped Kitten, with her blue eyes of night, he did slam down the paddle on the head of that quietly beautiful woman, and tip the canoe over, and squawl for help while he let her drown. And got cold feet only when I came scooting across the black water and bumped into the canoe that he was holding on to. Got cold feet, and cold all over.

Yet he said, without stammering, that it had been an accident. He said it without fear, or past the last and utter fear. He said it to his God.

Myself, I just don't know any answers. I write scripts for radio plays that will keep the customers interested, that will sound like something really happening when they are

put on before the mike. And that's all that I am interested in, how real they sound.

I can see her on the wharf that night while they were still diving for Koppelman's body, and at the Tawney place across the lake the next day while she was waiting for the Koppelmans, senior, to arrive, not knowing what to do. Twisting a handkerchief, with her lips bloodless, while my uncle and Dr. Denning patiently questioned her, as they had to do. And her answers, confused and harassed, not knowing all of them.

But she knew all the answers now.

It's almost a playing script, is what I mean. Only a few touches, a few changes for the great invisible radio audience. A dubbing in of sound effects. I turn the pages back to the beginning, to see where I shall start.

I waked up at midnight to give my baby his bottle. I stood at the window listening to the lapping of the water on the pier float. Somewhere I heard an owl cry, or perhaps it was a loon. In all the world that single cry, and the water lapping, were the only sounds. . .

Mr. Rutherford had put down his antique Sicilian dagger paper cutter, with his pink face relaxed.

"YOU THINK YOU can do it without changes, Beaman?" he said fondly.

"Not more than one or two small ones, I hope," I said.

Mr. Rutherford frowned slightly.

"I'm afraid Miss Lamarre would be much dismayed if you changed a single word," he said. "She isn't just one of these bloodless professional writers, who pull the last page of their stories off the machine and rush in with them yelling for their checks, and then don't even read the book that their stuff's published in. This is her brain child. She loves it. We told her in our wire of invitation that it is to be put on this evening after the cocktail party, and she is naturally much excited at the prospect of being present while it is being dramatized to the great invisible radio audience. I know your instinct, Beaman. But just for once don't let your thwarted urge for creative work tempt you to butcher a perfect little story, and break her heart."

I swallowed that. I've been called worse than a butcher, by experts in the verbal meat trade. I stood up a little groggily, with the mag beneath my arm. Eight hours till the great invisible radio audience tuned in its ears to the T.M.R. hour. Who said that I wanted to do creative work? If I could script her story without changing a syllable, I'd ask for nothing more, except to go home to sleep.

But you just can't. If it's written to be read, it's one kind of thing. If it's written to be listened to over the air, it's something else again. You can't play an ear of corn, or eat a saxophone.

She had deep blue eyes with smoky lashes like the eyes of night. But she didn't have an ear, not quite. She hadn't, for example, detected the difference between my double oar blade drip, feathered while I drifted, and what might have been the dripping of Koppelman's paddle returning to the boathouse float. And it hadn't been "Did she drown?" that she had whispered so tensely to me, but "Did you drown her?"

Only a slight difference, of course. Still I didn't want to change her story just to conform to what I had heard and she hadn't, or what I knew and she didn't. I just wanted to take it as she had told it and make it ready for the air. And if there was a difference in our memories about anything, I'd take hers, if possible.

I zoomed on an express elevator down to the Shea and Healy offices on the seventh floor, seventy below True Murder Romances' cloud-hugged pinnacle. I dived into my glass-cased cubicle in the radio-script department, tearing off my jacket, and plunked myself down at my typewriter, beginning to write it out in dialogue, straight. As she had written her story. Starting with Vilena's waking up to feed her baby and realizing that Charles had not come to bed, and feeling alarmed as she stood at the window listening to the quiet black lake water lapping down on the float.

(There's a splasher in a tub at the sound-effects mike which you use for anything like that—lake water lapping, lady taking a bath, or rush of giant combers over a sinking ship at sea, depending on how hard the sound effects man churns the splasher.)

And then discovering Hilda gone, too, and going down to the boathouse float, and hearing the drip of the oars approaching. And then flashing back to how they had

met, and how they had picked up Hilda from an employment agency in Boston. And up to the drownings and the post mortem on Hilda, which had given Charles a possible motive for her murder.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Murder by Midnight

I WROTE IT by the book, just reducing the descriptive passages to sounds, not changing a word of it. And the typing babes clicked the script out like machine-gun fire in sextuplicate, one copy for each of the five actors in the cast and one copy for the files. My uncle and I appeared in it in a very minor way, he as Sheriff Smert, the native storekeeper, and I as Cy, a gangling youth. The copy was done by four P.M. which, for a twenty-seven minute script with a lot of little different scenes in it, was good tight going.

And I tried it out in Number 5 broadcast room at the Consolidated studio, down on the fourth floor, with five old reliables who were able to read any part that was handed to them, from a circus elephant to a dying mother. But with the first sound effect they began to laugh, with a kind of hysteria sweeping through them. And having once started, they kept it up at intervals all through the reading, even the scene of my diving for the drowned woman and Koppelman saying his word to God and going down, where God knows they shouldn't have.

It's one of the worst damn busts you can have, to have even the actors laughing at your script. The thirteen million T.M.R. Hour fans are pretty serious, and they take their murders straight. They'd think we had turned into one of these comic things that have the four apes in them, and wouldn't even listen to an Hour again.

I would have to throw in that hand. Not the first time that I had had to toss a first draft away, and sometimes three or four, before I got it to sounding right. But never before with such little leeway to the broadcast bell. I ran, not walked, to the staircase, and back up to Shea and Healy's four at a time.

It wouldn't do any good to try tinkering with it, changing a little bit of it here and there. That would be all right if I had the usual week, maybe. But the time was too short. I should have to do it clean from the beginning, with a new angle, a new approach.

The closing bell had rung when I dashed back into the offices. I grabbed a couple of the outflowing typists by their little waists, hauling them back to stay on deck with me.

I sat down at my machine, and I began to click.

I started with Vilena and Charles returning to the boat-house float after canoeing, not at her bedroom window listening to the black water lapping. I started with a few words of conversation between her and Charles, and I kept right on. I wrote it so it sounded right, and was right, however it might read on a printed page with glossy illustrations in *True Murder Romances*. I wrote it without corrections, steadily and straight out, while the minute-hand went sliding around the clock like seconds, and the girls took the copy from me page by page and typed it out on their own machines.

It was eight by the time I had finished the last page; and there wouldn't be time for even one rehearsal. I grabbed the copies, and went leaping down the stairs again. From the elevator shafts beside the staircase, as I rounded each landing, the voices of hilarity and literary joy went shooting up and came shooting down from the T.M.R. party, which was still going strong. And maybe it would keep on going, I prayed, for the next hour or more, and Mr. Rutherford and Vilena would forget all about the time. For neither one of them was going to like the way I had had to change her story, if they heard it. They weren't going to like it at all.

I went sprinting past the reception girl in the Consolidated studio to Broadcast 5 again. Jessie and Estelle, Ed Williams and Jay and Herbert were waiting like old troupers, with Mr. Graham, the pink-faced announcer who did the commercial, and the sound-effects man, Gus Schmid, and the organist. I shuffled their copies to them. They wouldn't have much more than time to read it over to themselves, to get the new dialog, before the bell.

"Same parts," I said. "Jessie, still cute little Vilena. Estelle, still quiet Hilda. Ed, still Charles. Jay and Herb,

still old native and dumb boy. Same setting and same general action. Just conversations and point of attack changed a little around. I think it's got it. It has to."

The announcer had just gotten into his introduction when I saw a page at the broadcast-room door.

"Mr. Rutherford and the authoress in the reception room for you, Mr. Young."

I wiped my face and palms with my handkerchief, and went on out.

She was Koppelman's Kitten, all right.

She was at the front picture window of the reception room, which looked out at the plaza, with the awnings of the restaurant down below which was a skating-rink in winter, and all the flags flying on their tall staffs.

She was wearing a leopard coat, though the September day was warm, with her wistful, red-lipped face beneath a veil-fringed feather hat; with her dark blue, black-lashed eyes, and her hair like a crow's wing. She had a copy of the new issues of *True Murder Romances* clasped with her alligator purse against her breast.

A boy about a head shorter than she was stood in front of her, holding her hand. He wasn't Mr. Rutherford, because Mr. Rutherford was almost five feet six, and had a bald pink head.

He was a calm, intelligent-looking boy, with a broad shining brow and smooth, light-brown hair. He had steady brown eyes as he turned his face to look up at her. He seemed older than eight. He looked maybe ten. But he must be Alfred, who had been the baby. And I knew that I was right.

She turned around, and saw me.

"Mrs. Lamarre, the authoress?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "That's my pen name. I don't know if my in-laws would like it. Are you Mr. Beaman Young, the director?"

She didn't know me. I shouldn't have known myself, I guess, the gangling boy that I had been, after four years of war and four of peace. And I had been Bud Young, not Beaman.

"Right," I said. "Where's Mr. Rutherford?"

"He went dashing back up to his offices to get the fan mail that has come for me," she said. "He forgot it. He'll be down in a minute. A wonderful response from readers,

he told me. Already more than fifty letters. I'm crazy to see what they say."

"I'm sure you are," I said.

"He really has a lot of money, hasn't he?" she said.

"Mr. Rutherford?" I said. "Oh, definitely. All editors roll in it."

"Is it really true that he's a bachelor?"

"Sad but true," I said. "Like all *True Murder Romances*."

LONG SMOKY lashes still, and dark blue eyes. But all eyes are blue or brown, unless they're pink. Red lips. But you buy that in a stick. The loveliness of her face was a tissue-paper. There was nothing at all behind.

Mr. Rutherford came back to join her then, in his gaudy tweeds, with his fruity breath, and his face as pink and smooth and innocent as a pink Easter rabbit. And don't get me wrong—I like old Rutherford. He's just a romantic boy of fifty-three, and he has all women up on pedestals, and he sees the world through glasses as roseate as his face. He couldn't have made such a success of *True Murder Romances* if he had ever changed the diapers of twins.

"Kitten! Here they are. Just the first batch, but already it's a marvelous response. Beaman has introduced himself to you, I see. He's a married man, I should warn you, Kitten."

So she had already confided her nickname to him, even if maybe not yet her real name. And I could swear that he almost stuttered it, like Koppelman.

He handed her the big manila envelope he had under his arm, as he led her towards the broadcast door. He had been to too many broadcasts, and knew the way. I couldn't head them off.

She had taken the envelope a little greedily, unwinding the red string from the tab and pulling forth the contents, as they went down the corridor towards the broadcast room. I took the quiet boy by the hand, following them. I like kids, and I could feel his hand responding to my grip. It's hard for a boy not to have a father. And to have such a mother, perhaps.

"Look, Mr. Rutherford," she said, "a postcard. 'Just a line to say your story, Was My Husband a Murderer?', is

the most gripping and powerful I have ever read.' And why, here's a letter from—"

She dropped it on the marble floor.

I picked it up, and handed it to her. It was a long manila envelope with a printed return address on it, "Franklin C. Young, Sheriff, Aliopstook County, Big Moose Lake Landing, Moose Lake junction, Maine." Addressed in my old uncle's illegible scrawl to Mrs. Vilena Lamarre, care of *True Murder Romances*.

She held it against her breast a moment. She remembered my uncle, the address and title. He had frightened her a little with all his questions eight years ago, perhaps.

We had reached the broadcast room door. It was eight minutes still before we went on the air. Maybe Mr. Rutherford would remember something else that he wanted to go back up to his offices and get, I prayed, and maybe the elevators would stick on his way up and back. I tried to think of something for a stall.

I introduced the cast to her and him, and I showed her the mike where the actors stood, and the organ mike, and the sound-effects mike, with the door beside it to make the sound of a door, and the bureau drawers to make the sound of bureau drawers, and the tub of water for water lapping or a bath or hurricane, and the rubber squawker that was a baby's cry.

She shivered a little with distaste when I told her what it was. But she wasn't really interested so much as authors generally are, in the actors and the mikes and how it was all put on. She had that letter from my uncle in her hand, and she wanted very badly to read it. While as for Mr. Rutherford, he had seen it all before.

I led them into the sound-booth. The T.M.R. Hour isn't an audience show, of course. No laughter or applause are wanted. The business is all too deep and grim. But there are chairs for four or five listeners in the booth. For authors and sponsors, like her and Mr. Rutherford and the boy.

She had opened my uncle's letter, and was reading it avidly beside me before she sat down. I could have helped reading it myself, but I didn't. My uncle wrote a tough hand, which was hard for the uninitiated to decipher, but I knew it of old. And standing by Mr. Kelly, the sound-mixer, I could read it over her shoulder, from the



corner of my eye, in half the time it took her to make it out.

My uncle had gone all overboard for her, and down to the lake bottom.

Dear Mrs. Lamarre:

Your story, "Was My Husband a Murderer?" was sure a powerful one. It reminded me an awful lot of something that happened down here in Maine eight years ago to a man named Koppelman and the nursemaid he had for his baby, which only proves that there is nothing stranger than truth.

I sure sympathized with you, Mrs. Lamarre, on the way your nursemaid and husband treated you. I am glad that there was no one to cast question on you. In the case I cited, the lady whose husband was drowned, Mrs. Koppelman, didn't explain why she was down on the float at midnight. But maybe it was the same with her as with you, and she had waked up to feed her baby, only she couldn't think of it to tell us.

I am a great *True Murders* fan. Will look forward to hearing the broadcast of your powerful story over their Monday night hour on the Green network from half past eight to nine, which is my favorite broadcast. Only that is half past seven to eight, our time in Maine.

Yours respectfully,

Franklin C. Lubby  
(P. S. Over)

She looked up from the letter at me with a bright smile. It was almost as if she were gloating over me. Yet I don't think she knew I had been reading it. I think she just felt suddenly relieved, and suddenly triumphant, because my uncle had questioned her so hard eight years ago as to why she had been down on the boathouse float in the silent midnight—he had asked her about that particularly. She hadn't thought then of having waked up to feed the baby, and of having suddenly found Koppelman and the maid gone, and of going down and finding the canoe missing, to explain it. She hadn't thought of it then.

She was relieved and triumphant. Relieved of the burden of that dark question which she had now answered. She had written her story for my uncle, and for anyone in

the world who might still have doubts of her. It had been something she had had to tell, and that you had to listen to, and believe in. That had been the reason of its simple force. As if she had been sitting there, answering your questions.

"When does the broadcast begin?" she said a little breathlessly.

I SWALLOWED, looking at the clock. "I had to change it a little," I said. "I wrote a version that followed your story to the dot, but it didn't seem to click. I had to write another.

"We've still got a few minutes," I interjected, as Mr. Rutherford looked at me with pink reproach and she frowned. "I asked the actors to stand ready to run through the beginning of the first version that I did, if you wanted. But you'll see yourself that it wouldn't do at all."

And I gave them the signal from the window to start the thing as she had written it, and as they had tried to read it this afternoon: *I waked up at midnight to give the baby his bottle. . .*

*Wa-wa-wa-wa!* the sound man started it with his squawker.

It came through the speaker in the sound-booth.

"Good heavens!" she said, putting her hands towards her ears, with an angry face at me. "What's that hideous sound? It isn't in my story!"

"It's the baby waking up for his bottle," I said. "They always know their feeding time."

*Wa-wa! Waw!*

The cast out there were all laughing, as they had this afternoon. In the booth the brown-eyed boy, who had been a baby eight years ago, was smiling superiorly, and Mr. Rutherford was twisting in his seat uncomfortably.

"Vilena wouldn't be able to hear the water lapping down on the boathouse pier, you see," I explained a little tiredly, "or the lone loon giving his scream of maniacal laughter out over the lake. She would be rushing to change the pants on that baby and warm his bottle for him and stop his yells. But babies don't get their bottles at midnight, anyway. The hour of the midnight feeding is two A.M."

They were all laughing. I motioned them to cut the scene, before they had started a word of dialogue. The minute hand had moved around the clock.

"So I had to change it just a little," I said, sweating. "I made Hilda the wife, and Vilena the nursemaid they had hired. But it's still a good story."

The play was on. . . .

Water lapping.

"Oh, gug-gug-God. Hilda's there on the float! She knows we've been out again, Vilena. She's waiting for us!"

"Drown her, Charles! Drown her!"

"But, oh, gug-gug-God, I can't! I love her!"

"Drown her. Drown her now! You promised me you would, down in the summerhouse! Drown her, Charles! Tonight!"

Water lapping.

"Is that you, Charles, with Vilena? You might as well come in. No need of trying to dodge me like a sulky, guilty boy. Really, do you think it is quite fair? I don't wish to make a scene, but this cheap, foolish girl—"

"Lul-lul-listen! Lul-lul-isten! Kuk-kuk-kuk! Kuk-kuk-come out in the canoe with me, Hilda, and lul-let us tut-tut-tut-talk this over. Get out of the canoe, Vilena. Get in, Hilda. We will tut-tut-talk this over."

"Perhaps we can talk it over better alone, Charles. I never see you alone at all any more. Since we came up here with this girl—She seems to have made you crazy—"

"I kuk-kuk-can't help it. Lul-let's just paddle a little, and not talk about it."

"You don't need to talk, Charles, if you don't want to. But just think it over in your own mind, without that girl with you to destroy your sense of values. Just what does she mean to you?"

Water lapping. . .

Koppelman's Kitten sat with my uncle's letter in her hand. She had turned it over to the back. Slowly she crushed it in her fist. She looked at me with eyes of hate.

She got up, and was coming at me. So help me, she had that antique Sicilian dagger of Mr. Rutherford's in her cute little fist. I guess she had picked it up for a remembrance during the cocktail party.

But it was really sharp. It went slicing through my new ninety-dollar suit before I had caught her wrist and twisted it from her. And maybe nicked a little skin on my ribs beneath.

"Catch!" I said to Mr. Rutherford, as her face went white, and she keeled over.

I let him pick her up. He needed the exercise. I picked up my uncle's letter where she had crumpled it on the floor.

There was the postscript he had written on the back.

P.S. About those Koppelmans I mentioned, it always kind of seemed to me that Mrs. Koppelman was more the nursemaid type, and the blonde lady who was their maid more the type of wife. If it had been that way, I'd have had the irons on that little red-lipped lady quicker than you can slap a blackfly in August. It would have been a perfect set-up for murder. But I guess your story proves it wasn't. Will be listening for it, as I say.

Respectfully,

F. C. Young

Well, my uncle was listening to it right now, up there on his broken-sprunged old sofa in his living-room above the store at Big Moose Lake Landing. Unless he had left his radio to call up Dr. Sawtelle, the coroner, and the county prosecutor to ask for a quick grand jury. . .

It had been my fault. I had made the mistake that first night, when Koppelman had spoken about getting Mrs. Koppelman to come into the store and help select supplies, and I had assumed that she was Mrs. Koppelman. She had enjoyed the pretension of being Mrs. Koppelman in my eyes, when she realized my mistake, and had got Koppelman to live up to it, as a joke, he had no doubt thought.

I had made a mistake of just one word, too, in the only conversation I ever had with that beautiful quiet woman who was Koppelman's wife, out in front of the store that night. I had asked her if she was the nurse, and she had said yes. She had meant that she was a nurse—she had been in the hospital in London where Koppelman had met her. . .

There's no capital punishment in Maine. And if there were, it wouldn't be for a witch like her, with her blue eyes of night. I think it was five years that they gave her, when she pled to false pretenses, or something like that. But she had had her eight years with the Koppelmans, senior, already, which had been a tomb itself. She'll never get any of their money, anyway, nor any of the brown-eyed boy's.

Brown eyes. Hers and Koppelman's were blue. And two blue-eyed parents rarely have a brown-eyed child. It had been the color of the boy's eyes which had told me my script was right.

I'm going to see that that quietly beautiful blonde woman who was born Catherine van Groot, and who died a nameless Mabel Clane, is buried sometime where she belongs, over in her own country, under her own name and religion, whatever it was. She had a right to it.

# THE HANGING ROPE

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Beanpole Man and the Cat Man

IF KERRY OTT, the playwright, hadn't detested a bad play with all his mind and to his dying breath, the murder in the Royal Arms apartment house that night might have been written off as unanswerable. Or at best have been ascribed to some vague, intangible, amorphous third visitor who old Dan McCue had had, in addition to the beanpole and the cat man—the lawyer and the priest—after they had both made their departures.

And yet there was nothing complicated about the killings. They were actually one of those classics of crime simplicity, with a definite place where they occurred, a limited number of men who could possibly have committed them, and the police already at the door before they were completed. Practically every detail about them was apparent at a glance, except how the killer had got away.

We'll take the scene, first.

The murders took place in the fourth floor rear apartment—apartment 4C, consisting of large library living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom and bath, hallway, and four or five closets—of Mr. Daniel McCue, the wealthy retired contractor and political sachem. The weapons used were a wine bottle and a fireside poker for the first killing, and sharp steel for the second—crude and simple weapons, with more blood than was necessary spilled and spattered about. Old Dan McCue himself was done to death at three minutes after midnight; the terrified girl within the next dozen minutes, according to those who heard her scream.

It was as simple as that. A dozen minutes, a locked apartment, and two dead. The killer must have been present to do his killings, at the time they were committed. Up to the last terrible minute he must have been there, desperate and cornered, with the alarm raised before he had completed his work, and the police already at front and back. And yet there was no one who saw him. He

might have been as invisible as smoke or mist. As transparent as the highball glass he finished off before he killed old Dan McCue. As thin and sharp as the steel he used on that girl's warm throat.

PERHAPS IN that moment in the hallway as he pushed past the doorway of the murder bedroom, in the flash of the silver blow that fell, Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had seen his face. Yet the vision was so quick, he fell so suddenly, he could not be sure of what had struck him. The big blue-clad cop had fled by then. The rustling in the kitchen had ceased. Tuxedo Johnny lay there dazed, the only living thing, as far as he knew, within that death apartment. And there was no answer to how the murderer had got away.

He said to Big Bat O'Brien of homicide, going through the murder apartment afterwards, "We were within thirty feet of her when he killed her. Right at the door. It must have been only a matter of seconds. But he wasn't there. Nobody. There just had to be some way."

"Front door locked on the inside, Johnny," Big Bat enumerated. "Fire escape window locked on the inside. Bars on all the other windows. He couldn't have, but he did. And unless someone turns up who saw him and can identify him, there's not a thing in God's world to pin it on him, either. The damned cup of custard must have been wearing gloves. He didn't leave a print."

Not a print that could be identified as belonging to a murderer exclusively. The homicide men had dusted everything by then. There were Paul Bean's prints (the lawyer's), of course, and Father Finley's (the purring priest's), as was to be expected, since they had both visited old Dan McCue that night. But they had both left before the murders.

"He was smart," said Tuxedo Johnny. "He was smart, and I played it dumb—you're right, Bat. Still I'd like to be able to figure out, just for my own personal satisfaction, how he could have got away. There had to be a way."

Well, there was a way of escape, though they were a little late in discovering it ... There had to be a way, and so there was. Only one, but one was all he needed.

*The Hanging Rope*

AT HALF PAST eleven that night, according to his later statement to the police, Paul Bean, old Dan McCue's lawyer, had decided that it was time for him to say good night. He had set down his highball glass, put his cigar butt in the tray on the smoking table beside his chair, glanced at his watch and unfolded his long stilt-like legs.

"Time for the hay, Dan," he remarked in his profound and lugubrious voice. "I've always got a load of work at the office in the morning. I'll try to drop in with a tentative will draft tomorrow evening for you to look over."

"No need to rush it," said old Dan. "Plenty of time before I die."

"That's what you think," said Paul Bean. "I'll be around again soon, anyway."

"Here, boy, you haven't finished out your drink," old Dan said. "You've left the half of it."

"Put a tag on it, Dan, and save it for me the next time," said Paul Bean.

He opened the lid of the silver humidior on the satin-wood desk and selected another corona before departing. He picked up the magnum of champagne with a pink ribbon around its neck, which he had brought under his arm, unwrapped, and had given to old Dan for his birthday tomorrow. He examined the label again, then set it down.

Old Dan McCue, in his green silk dressing gown and easy slippers, with his glass and cigar, did not bother to accompany Paul Bean to the front door. Paul Bean frequently dropped in of evenings for a short visit, living only three or four blocks away on Park Avenue as he did, and the formality wasn't necessary.

With his cigar in his mouth, the tall attenuated lawyer had gone along the hall towards the front door, past the doorways of dining room on the left and bedroom on the right. He had not opened the coat closet, not having even a hat to bother with in the warm September night. He had opened the front door of old Dan McCue's apartment, and had gone on out, closing the door behind.

Paul Bean was better known, of course, as Pole Bean. It would have taken a man with a great deal of originality not to have called him that. In college twenty years ago, where he had been a pole-vaulter, there had been a comedy pretence of being unable to distinguish him and his bamboo apart; and he had never cleared the bar without



some wit in the stands yelling a protest that he had merely dug his heels into the ground and heaved his pole across.

That is known as a sense of humor to those who have it. He had none himself. He was a cautious and careful lawyer, however. Besides being old Dan's counsel, he had been his son-in-law for a dozen years, having been married to Dan's late daughter Sue.

She had died six months ago in a rather tragic and hideous way, of a cat scratch which had developed into tetanus, and for which serum had been used too late. It had been an event shattering to old Dan, not to speak of Paul Bean himself, following as it had the death of Dan's only son, by drowning, a few years before. It was for that reason that Paul Bean made it a point to drop in once or twice a week for a brief visit. With the added reason tonight of bringing old Dan the bottle of birthday champagne.

He had brought up, just incidentally, the matter of Dan's making a will, which Dan had never done. Perhaps with a subconscious superstition, like many men, that to do so was a kind of invitation for death. Or perhaps out of mere procrastination, not believing that he, with his great powerful body and long-lived ancestors, at a mere sixty years of age would not have still another thirty years to go.

Paul Bean, being a lawyer, realized better the uncertainties of life, however. He knew that there were various hospitals and other charities which Dan would like to have benefit by moderate bequests and probably some personal friends, like harmless and slightly demented Father Finley. It would be a good thing too, to have himself as executor, since he was acquainted with all of Dan's affairs. Old Dan had seemed not unacquiescent to the idea, Paul Bean thought. If he had not agreed, at least he had not disagreed.

Paul Bean had left that scene, which was not yet a murder scene, at half past eleven. He had paused in the corridor outside to light his cigar, with his shadow long and thin on the marble floor.

He had rung for the slow little elevator, but it had not replied at once. He had decided to walk down the stairs, and had done so, not meeting anyone on the way. In the

lobby he observed the gilt scrollwork top of the elevator cage down in the basement. The operator was probably having supper, and had not heard his ring.

He had gone out into the night, walking west towards Park Avenue. A block away he passed a fat-bellied policeman moving slowly down in the shadows of the building line, who adjusted his cap with a deferential gesture when Paul Bean spoke a gloomy, "Good evening, officer," to him. A block farther on a couple of half-grown youths, playing some kind of wild chase-tag game on and off the sidewalk, tripped Paul Bean as he tried to angle his way between them, and he fell sprawling in a tangled knot, like a giraffe, scraping his palms and the pads of his fingers, and tearing his pants knees.

With expressions of regret, the boys got hold of him beneath the armpits to help him up, and just as he got his long legs untangled and was starting up from all fours, kicked him in the pants, sending him sprawling again and running away down the street laughing. Considerably hurt, both in skin and feelings, and with his cigar mashed and lost on the sidewalk, Paul Bean got himself up once more. The boys had ducked around some corner, and the policeman he had passed a block before was no longer in sight. Holding his palms up like a melancholy Airedale, and limping slightly, Paul Bean proceeded on to Park Avenue, and down it to his own large and lofty apartment building.

The elevator man was still on duty—after midnight there was only a small self-service elevator for tenants. Paul Bean rode up to the fourteenth floor, where he got off, with an exchange of good nights, and was unlocking the door of his apartment opposite before the doors were closed.

Having arrived home, where he lived alone now that he was a widower, and with his step-daughter Jennie away at summer camp, Paul Bean proceeded into the bathroom off his bedroom, where he washed the dirt and skinned blood from his hands, and soaked them in hot water. He applied a soothing lotion when he had dried them, after which he wrapped surgical gauze with adhesive tape on his fingertips. At his bureau in his bedroom he removed his jacket, with some clumsiness because of his bandaged hands, and examined the dirt upon it.

He took out his watch from his pants fob pocket and wound it. It said five minutes and thirty seconds of midnight, he observed.

He began to remove the other items from the various pockets of his pants and jacket, putting them on the bureau with his watch, to have his suit ready for the cleaners in the morning. He paused a moment, standing before his mirror motionless, looking at the reflection of his dark green eyes in his small dark bony face, with his bandaged hands pressed to his hollow ribs, meditating. He continued his undressing, stepping out of his light-colored suit pants. He went to his clothes closet, where his robe and pajamas hung on a hook, next to a hook on which hung a pair of dark baggy slacks and a dark golf pullover and reached in . . .

But Paul Bean was not the last man to see old Dan McCue alive.

AT A QUARTER of midnight, or a few minutes later, the pan-faced elevator operator of the Royal Arms opened his gates on the fourth floor for the little shadowy man who stood there, having rung to go down. He was a slight little man, not more than five feet two inches in height and weighing perhaps not more than ninety pounds, dressed in a dark grey, silk-like alpaca with a clerical collar, and a stiff straw hat which had been dyed black and varnished. He had a vague, wistful face, which he was rubbing with his fingers as the elevator arrived, in the way of a man who feels a new shave. He pulled out a tobacco pouch and pipe as he stepped into the elevator, with an apologetic, sidewise gesture.

The Royal Arms elevator men knew him by sight—Father Finley, as he called himself, a friend of Mr. McCue's. He lived somewhere in the neighborhood, and came in frequently to see Mr. McCue, or just to wander around the corridors or down in the basement—though Swede Rasmussen, the janitor, always chased him out when he got down there—looking for some stray cat to feed.

The pan-faced elevator man, whose name was Boaz, didn't particularly like to have Father Finley riding in his car. That wasn't because the little man was probably demented, and might some day pull out a hatchet from un-

derneath his coattails and maybe chop him from behind, but because he smoked a bad-smelling shag tobacco, and had also about him a somewhat disagreeable meaty odor, in spite of his clean and well-bathed look.

The goof had probably just come from Mr. McCue's, thought the elevator man.

"Mr. McCue still up, Padre?" he said, closing the cage doors, although he knew that old Dan McCue never went to bed before one or two o'clock.

"I believe so," said Father Finley. "I believe that he was up, or sitting down. I just dropped in to have a shave. Did I get it clean enough? I had a drink with him, too. Or rather, he poured out a drink for me. I'm not sure if I drank it. We were discussing philosophy, and I smoked my pipe. Have you seen a cat wandering about by any chance?"

His voice was soft and purring and quite inoffensive. Boaz, the elevator man, thought it disagreeable, however, like his smell. The sound of it always lifted the bristles on the back of his neck.

"What kind of a cat, Padre?" Boaz said.

"A grey Maltese cat," said Father Finley, with his vague eyes lighting for the instant. "More precisely, perhaps, a kitten. A grey half-grown cat about five months old, with a short tail, a white breast, and three white feet—all except the left hind one. I saw it on the sidewalk out in front an hour ago, but before I could reach it it had disappeared, either into the building here or down the alley. It was homeless and hungry. It was crying. I shall not sleep tonight, worrying about it. You haven't seen it, you say?"

"No," said the elevator man. "Maybe it went down into the basement, and Swede Rasmussen caught it to make a stew out of it. If I see it I'll tie a brick to its tail and heave it out the door for you, though, Father Finley."

"How brutal—how bloody—some men are!" said the little man in grey sadly. "It is such a cruel world. A hard and cruel world. The things that some men have in their hearts are inconceivable."

"Yeah," said Boaz. "Ain't it awful? It busts my heart, too. Was Mr. McCue alone when you left him, Padre?"

"I believe he was," said Father Finley vaguely. "Yes, I am sure of it. Dan mentioned that Paul Bean had just gone."

"I just wondered," said Boaz.

He took another bite of the half-finished sandwich in his hand as they reached the lobby floor. He hadn't seen Mr. Bean go, though he had taken him up at about eleven. He hadn't seen Father Finley come in, for that matter, either. However, he was seeing him now, going out.

Boaz, the pan-faced elevator man, strolled after the little man in thin whispering silky grey to the doorway of the Royal Arms, which stood open in the warm late summer night. Father Finley turned left, and Boaz looked right down the street, towards Third Avenue and Park beyond. The fat blue bulk of a patrolman was coming down the midnight street from there, having just emerged from a doorway, it looked like. Boaz recognized him as Ignatz Slipsky.

The little man in grey went down the sidewalk, past the entrance of the black alley which separated the Royal Arms from the old brownstone tenement next door, where he lived. He mounted the worn sandstone steps and went in through the heavy walnut doors with their small ground glass paneling, on which was lettered ARGYLL HALL in peeling gilt script. He went up the worn creaky wooden stairs inside under dim bulbs above each landing, past snoring doors and dead deserted doors on the second and third floors, pausing momentarily to listen and look around him. At the top floor he paused again a moment.

He looked toward the door of the rear flat on the right. On tiptoes he moved toward it.

That right rear flat had been shown to him before he had moved in a month ago. However, he had preferred the front with its view of the street and southern exposure, even at two dollars and fifty cents more a month.

As far as he knew, the rear flat was still empty. No truckload of broken furniture had been moved into it that he had observed. There had been no garbage cans at the door, no swarming children erupting from it, no sounds of yelling voices behind it, or any other normal indications of life and occupation. Father Finley listened a moment, with his head bent to the door panel, quietly pulling a pair of grey silk summer gloves on his delicate small hands, just as the great bonging bell in the clock tower around the corner on Third Avenue began the slow stroke of midnight. . .

## *The Hanging Rope*

But this was not the murder scene, of course. This was in Argyll Hall, next door, across the alley. The fact was that Father Finley, like Paul Bean before him, had departed from that murder scene, from old Dan McCue's apartment, before the murders began. Both the two known visitors whom old Dan had had that evening had departed. And the murderer, when those murders took place, was in the Royal Arms. He was in old Dan's apartment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Twelve Minutes

THAT WAS THE murder scene—old Dan McCue's apartment. Entrance hallway, dining room and kitchen to the right, bedroom and bath to the left, and down at the end of the hall, across the back of the building, the large library living room, furnished with bookcases filled with tooled leather, grand piano, a huge rug, satinwood desk, Old Masters and easy chairs grouped around the fireplace. Front door and fire escape in back. All windows of all rooms with bars on them, except the fire escape window, and one little bathroom window.

Old Dan was in the living room. Maybe he had been sipping and smoking, garbed in his green silk dressing gown, thinking of his birthday, which would be tomorrow, thinking of all the years of his life. Maybe he had just arisen from his chair, hearing a ring at his door—maybe the black-eyed girl in that moment was at his door, waiting to be let in.

Or maybe the doorbell didn't ring at all and she came in with a key old Dan had given her—there was the key on the bathroom shelf, and it might have been hers, not Finley's. Or maybe old Dan had arisen, instead, to pour himself a fresh drink at his mahogany cellarette—and looked around and his murderer was there.

Maybe the murderer said, "Hello, Dan."

"When in hell," maybe old Dan said in startlement, "did you come back? I thought I had got rid of you for good." Or, "How in hell did you get in?" with sudden suffused rage. "Sneaked in, did you?"

Maybe the murderer said, "It's a long story, Dan. I'll tell you about it."

And maybe he picked up a half-emptied highball glass then, that stood on one of the pieces of furniture, and half sat on the arm of one of the easy chairs, reaching in his pockets nervously for something to smoke.

"I've heard enough of your long stories and tall tales," maybe old Dan said. "I don't like you, boy, I've told you. I think you're sneaking, scheming, and too smart for your own breeches. I think you're a swine and greedy and money-mad. Ay, by God there are times when I think you might be a murderer. You know who. And I've wrestled with me soul whether or not to take it up with Big Bat O'Brien at homicide. Yet it's not in me to give any man a dirty name without the proof, and I know Big Bat would say there was no proof. And even if there was aught of proof, it would not bring back the dead. If you have done murder and got away with it, let it be between you and your God. . . .

"Here, let me get you a fresh glass," maybe old Dan said. "The liquor in that is stale. Help yourself to a cigar, if you've a mind to, too. Damned if I like you or anything about you, and this sneaking way of coming has a dirty look to me. But no man will be a guest of Dan McCue's without a show of hospitality. What kind of a story is it that you have to tell me, that brings you so quiet? About me money, maybe, that you'd like to get your hands on?"

Maybe old Danny said words like that. Or maybe he said something different. Or maybe he just turned to the cellarette to mix a highball for his murderer, and the murderer carefully and quietly picked up the heavy fireside poker from the hearth, or the champagne bottle with the pink ribbon around it which stood on the desk, and crept two steps towards old Danny, behind his back.

Maybe old Danny saw the gesture of that skull-crushing blow, and reached for his telephone then. Or maybe the first furious blow had struck him before he knew it. . . .

That was the scene, anyway. Old Dan's living room. And the murderer was there, in it, when he killed old Dan McCue at three minutes after twelve that night, and a dozen minutes later when he killed that black-eyed girl.

*The Hanging Rope*

KERRY OTT, the big deaf playwright, was never on the scene of those murders in the Royal Arms, like Paul Bean and Father Finley and, of course, the murderer. He would never, therefore, have to make any explanations to the police.

He did not know the murderer. He did not know Paul Bean or Father Finley. He did not know old Dan McCue. He had never seen or heard of that black-eyed girl who died fifteen feet from him. He was even quite unaware that murder was happening near him in that quarter hour after midnight.

He had nothing to do with it and wanted nothing. Still it wasn't particularly fortunate for him that the killer would be able to escape only over his dead body . . .

A few minutes after the clock had struck, Kerry Ott came back to life.

Something—the reverberation of the ponderous bell, perhaps—had penetrated his remote absorption. He looked up at the peeled, discolored wallpaper in from of him, in the dingy corner where he sat writing. What time was it? What was happening, if anything? And where was he anyway?

He had been working with intense concentration for an incalculable number of unstirring hours on the last act of his new comedy, which he had contracted to have in his producer's hands by the fifteenth of the month, under penalty for delay. Living, while he wrote, in an imagined time and an imagined place, while a set of characters of his own invention made their entrances and their exits before his eyes and spoke their lines to his inner hearing, for the moment he could not have told what day of the week it was, and hardly his own name.

But now something had broken the wall around him, and he was back on earth.

He was in the small side room of the six-room unfurnished railroad flat, on the top floor of the four-story old tenement called Argyll Hall in the East Sixties, which he had rented a few days ago as a hideout while he finished his play. A kitchen table to write on and a kitchen chair to sit on, a dilapidated chest of drawers to hold his necessary shirts and socks, and an army cot in the corner to collapse on when exhausted—he had bought the lot for ten dollars at a secondhand place down on Third Avenue,



and anything more would have been only an invitation to ease and distraction.

A hundred watt bulb hanging from the ceiling just back of his left shoulder gave him light. A ream of yellow paper lay on the table, together with a smaller sheaf of completed draft, covered with his large firm black handwriting. The floor around him was littered ankle deep with many times as many crumpled and discarded ones, like a strewing of wilted yellow chrysanthemums.

His big awkward frame seemed to have grown to his chair—to have become wood like it, and a part of it. He put down his pencil, and stretched himself. He was tired in every muscle and brain cell.

The only window of the room, beside him, was shut and its heavy green shade was pulled down. He liked to work in small, closed places, with a draftless stillness all about him and by artificial light—as remote as the silent centre of the earth, lit by the flare of the never-setting sun, which burns pallidly and forever at the core of things, and where no wind blows.

No wind blew now. And all around him in the dingy room there was, as always, the silence. But there had been an interruption. The thread of the play had slipped from him. The inaudible voices no longer spoke. The substanceless characters had no more life.

He found he had no remotest idea of the time. His watch had stopped at a quarter after three. It had been ten o'clock of the morning when he had stumbled up groggy-eyed and swaying still from three hours sleep and had sat down, breakfastless, to resume work. He had lost all awareness of the passage of time since—whether it was daylight still, or whether the night had come, or the dawn of a tomorrow.

Somewhere, a minute or two ago, a clock had struck. It must have been that which had disturbed him. The great brazen bonging bell in the clock-tower around the corner on Third Avenue. Once or twice before, during the past days, he had felt its slow repercussions throb through the shut-in atmosphere of his room—at times perhaps when there was no street traffic to dissipate them, or when the wind was right. A thudding faintly felt in the marrow of his bones, like the strike of a muffled hammer on padded wood.

### *The Hanging Rope*

He thought back, counting the echoes of those slow beats in his memory—*twelve*. It was midnight, then. Unless it was noon again.

He pulled aside the shade from the window. A black and yellow spider, with long black legs, had spun its web across the dingy unwashed pane. It looked at him with jet points of eyes, not moving when it saw him.

What thoughts were in its brain, hell knew, at the great bland face and slow mild stare of the maker of plays appearing around the shade edge above it. Perhaps that doom's day had come on it, in its life of hidden, sticky murder. Paralyzed, it awaited the blow which would smash it.

But it was no harm to him. He had no interest in destroying it. He was not God.

He looked out, eating crackers.

OUTSIDE, DARKNESS lay on the world. Night, then, and the middle of it had been the stroke which he had felt subconsciously. About two or three minutes after midnight now. Twelve or fifteen feet across an alleyway he looked out on a brick wall set with windows—the side of the six-story apartment building next door, called by some name such as the Royal Arms, an old-fashioned but still respectable pile, several degrees higher in the social and financial scale than the decayed cold-water old walk-up he was in.

There was a small window with a dark frosted pane, open about six inches from the top, directly across from him—the bathroom window, by its looks, of the rear apartment opposite. There were two pairs of larger windows to the left of it. A light flicked out and a rim of shadow cut across the side wall just above those windows—a rim beneath which was blackness, and above which was blackness, also, though a shade less black. A pair of vague wavering shadows were moving on the wall above that shadow rim—a pair of gargoyle shapes, fantastic and grotesque, one of them resembling a human figure standing on its head and waving its legs in the air, the other a human figure hopping on one foot, holding its thumb derisively to its nose. There was a thin line above them like a shadow of a rope, motionless and horizontal.

The shadows changed shape and position—for a while like boys leaping with upstretched arms, or suddenly swooping and stooping, as if tossing a beanbag back and forth, then both of them suddenly sprang together and merged in a kind of jitterbug dance . . . Kerry Ott watched with mild interest for a full two or three minutes, eating crackers, before the thing finally faded down and vanished.

He looked down into the blackness of the alley four stories below, when the shadow show was over. Two dark shapes of men, more to be guessed at than seen, were hurrying down the alley towards the rear of the Royal Arms. There was something in their agitated stride, and perhaps also a certain ponderosity of bulk they had, which reminded him of a pair of Keystone cops, complete with walrus mustaches, brass-buttoned frock coats, and grey helmets, diligently pursuing a mocking quick-footed shadow all around the barn. He smiled mildly at the suggestion of comedy flatfoot futility.

Light suddenly flashed on behind the little frosted window opposite, as the two dark hurrying figures reached the rear of the Royal Arms, turning back. Through the opening at the top of the window he could see a corner section of midnight blue wall, studded with silver stars, and a portion of chromium shower-curtain bar, with a light-cord hanging from the ceiling near it. A naked arm had reached up and pulled the light on, in that instant.

Nothing distinct—just a moment's glimpse of a cord-grasping hand and a portion of a bare human arm, perhaps a woman's hand and arm, perhaps a meager man's, undressed for a bath, or in a sleeveless summer garment. As the light went on, the arm had been retracted down. The light remained behind the pane. The smoke of a cigarette came drifting enigmatically up toward the ceiling.

Kerry Ott had finished his box of crackers. He let his window shade drop back into place. He picked up his watch and wound it, setting it at approximately 12:06, and went back to work.

AT LAST HE arose ponderously and stiffly, pushing back his chair, wading through the crumpled yellow papers which crushed beneath his shuffling feet with the feel of trodden popcorn. He picked up a cake of soap from the

### *The Hanging Rope*

top of his chest of drawers. At the door he took a towel from a wooden horse which stood tilted against the wall, on a pile of three or four paint-smeared planks stacked up against the baseboard—gear left by painters at some date indefinite, together with some buckets of dried paints and a few rolls of dusty wallpaper.

He went out, feeling for the small bulb outside the door and turning it on. He went back down the long dim-lit railroad hall of the flat, past the doorways of black unfurnished rooms, to the kitchen in the back.

He hadn't bothered to supply bulbs for more than his work room light and the one small hall light. In the kitchen he found the iron sink by feel, across the sagging floor. He washed his face and eyes and the back of his neck beneath the slow-running, rusty faucet, in darkness, and dried himself with the rough towel. Picking up his soap again, he went back up the hall to his little room, turning off the hall light in passing.

He draped his damp towel over the tilted sawhorse and tossed his wet soap towards the bureau top. His watch said 12:14 now. He turned off the light above his writing table and felt his way back to his cot in the far corner, where he sat down and pulled off his shoes, then flung himself back, utterly exhausted, with the figures of his play still in his mind.

If beyond his closed and shaded window, across the alleyway, in the fourth floor rear apartment of the Royal Arms, a woman screamed in that moment as swift death struck her, he did not hear it, and he did not know it.

Nor know that in that apartment over there a previous murder had been done, when he had been looking out. And that he had glimpsed the murderer, a man whose face he had not seen, nor would recognize if he should see it.

He knew nothing about it, Kerry Ott. He was never on that murder scene. He was separated from it by a closed window, an alleyway, and a brick wall. He was probably the only man who had a view into that murder apartment while both the front door was chained and the rear window was locked, if that was in any way important. But he had seen nothing.

He was just the man across the alley, not knowing and not hearing, seeing only that vague little, during those twelve minutes of frenzied murder . . .

THE THIRD operator from the end on the Harkness-4 exchange board—shuttling her wires with rapid hands, murmuring incessantly with her soft cooing voice into her headphone—saw a light flash on at the left side of her board, connection 1203.

"Ridgewood naine, one-naine-thurree-thurree," she murmured. "Deposit fifteen cents for five minutes, please . . . We are not allowed to give out the time, madam. Dial Meridian seven one-two-one-two . . . I will connect you with Information . . . What number were you calling? Harkness four, four-eight-four-three has been changed to Harkness thurree-one-naine . . . I will connect you with Information . . . We are not allowed to give out the time, sir. Dial Meridian . . ."

But the time, as she happened to glance and notice, was just 12:03, by the minute-turning electric clock above the board.

There was a red light at 12:03. McCue, Dan'l J.'s number, if she had known it, at 219 East Sixty-somethingth Street. Miles away from where she sat shuttling her loom of wires, weaving the city fates, old Dan McCue had seized his phone in his great thick-veined hand and had dialed the operator.

In case of emergency, dial operator, the book says.

It was just one more light in a busy midnight hour to her. She plugged in.

"Operator," she said.

"He—"

A kind of groaning sound followed by a thump, came over the wire. No word beyond that one meaningless syllable, however.

"Operator," she repeated. "What number did you want?"

But Harkness 4-1203 gave her no number. There was only the silence in her earphones, after that groaning bump.

She listened efficiently. The red light flashed out at the end of a moment, as the instrument was quietly replaced. So there was no need for her even to report to the trouble desk that Harkness 4-1203 was temporarily out of or-

der. She shuttled her wires with rapid hands, disconnecting 1203 and connecting a hundred other calls, and bothered no more about it.

So whether old Dan McCue had felt that first crushing, paralyzing blow crash down on him, and had tried dazedly, with a dying effort, to summon help, or had died totally unwarned, must remain uncertain, like some other items of that scene. He had seized his phone, and jerked the dial round, and uttered that one croaking syllable—that was all. But he might merely have been trying to call a Hellgate number, or Helsinki, Finland.

The uncompleted call fixed the time of his murder, anyway. The coincidence of the phone number and the time had registered on the operator's mind—1203 calling at 12:03—and she would be able to give Tuxedo Johnny Blythe that much information, when he queried her later if she had heard anything. Which information Tuxedo Johnny would pass on to Big Bat O'Brien of homicide, together with all the details that he could remember of every man he had met from the time he left old Dan's door, around that murder time, up to the time of that second murder back up in the dark apartment a dozen minutes later.

After he had recovered his wits a little, and was trying to think it out.

TUXEDO JOHNNY BLYTHE had had almost no wits at all, to say the best about it, when he first came cascading down the narrow marble stairs beside the elevator shaft in the Royal Arms from old Dan McCue's door on the fourth floor.

What the exact time was he didn't know. His wrist watch had said around 12:10, he remembered having seen subconsciously, staring at his hand as he sped down. It had been running anywhere from five to nine minutes fast recently, however, as he knew, and so was subject to an indeterminate correction, which he would have no opportunity to make.

It wasn't to consult the time, though, that Tuxedo Johnny was holding up his hand and staring at it with bugging eyes as he rushed down the stairs. There was blood on it—a red slipperiness on his fingers and in the

crevices of his palm, which had a still fresh warm, abhorrent feeling.

*Blood!* his Adam's apple seemed to bubble. *My God, it's slippery!* he thought or bubbled. *How in hell did I get all that on me?*

With the instinctive revulsion of a neat, fastidious and well-manicured man—with the inchoate, inane reaction of almost any kind of man in a like moment—he snatched his handkerchief forth from his breast pocket, and pulled at his fingers to wipe them off as he ran. But it would need soap and water. He balled the linen away in his hip pocket as he rounded the elevator shaft on the second floor and poured his agitated two hundred pounds on down towards the lobby.

"Blood!" his throat bubbled.

In spite of his police background, Tuxedo Johnny had had singularly little contact with blood of any kind before, either in accident or murder. He had never been a soldier or even a rabbit-hunter. Even the sight of his own blood always agitated him—a minor cut on the chin while shaving would cause him an anxious and painstaking application of cold towels and styptic collodion, and keep him fingering the place for hours afterwards imagining it still oozing. He had given himself such an invisible nick on the train up from Washington this evening to see old Dan, as it happened, belatedly scraping away his five o'clock shadow outside Baltimore; and he touched the spot now again, with a connection of instinctive thought. But it had dried up as hard as a beetle's shard, of course, hours ago.

There was blood up there on old Dan's doorknob, he thought with horror. Perhaps on the door-frame, also, and the sill—he wasn't sure. Maybe not a great amount, though it seemed to him for the moment that it must be like a huge and pouring tide, which was rushing out from beneath Dan's door and flooding down the stairs after him.

Blood! What else? He must think over every detail. He must keep cool, he told himself—he must not be panicked—being panicked completely.

The slow little gilt elevator in its openwork shaft had gone up, answering that ring from the floor above old Dan's. The car had passed him in its ascent when he was halfway down between the third and second floors, with

its bald-headed, pan-faced, operator standing at the control, dressed in a plum-colored jacket with black frogs and a pair of baggy tweed pants, and holding something to his mouth—a sandwich or a bite of cake—which he was meditatively eating.

He might have been down in the basement having supper. Some new man, the thought flashed to Tuxedo Johnny, whom he had never seen before. But he hadn't been in New York for several months and around to see old Dan, and the whole staff of the apartment house quite possibly had changed.

He hadn't waited for the elevator, anyway. The front door was the only way a killer could get away . . .

That there might be anyone still up there in old Dan's apartment did not occur to him. And whether there was, at that precise moment, was something which would later baffle much better cops than he had ever been.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had been, before going to Washington with the F.A.B., old Dan McCue's political lieutenant and right hand man for fifteen years, and had occupied various minor positions in the city government, having a knack for smoothing things over and getting along with people.

He had got his name of Tuxedo Johnny, not because he invariably wore a black tie after six o'clock, but because he had been, eighteen or so years before, one of the famous tuxedo Cops—one of the half dozen graduates appointed to the force by Commissioner Enfield as lieutenants, after an oral examination and on the basis of their athletic records, without going through the ranks. It had been the intention at the time to appoint six more the same way each year, and so gradually build up a nucleus from which future ranking officers could be drawn. The experiment was not continued the next year however, when Waldron succeeded Enfield. Of the original half dozen, two had soon resigned to go into banking, one to join the army, one to become a Trappist monk, and one, of course, is still a star in Hollywood.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, who had remained on the force the longest of any of them, something less than three years, had resigned when he married Dan McCue's daughter at the big wedding at St Christopher's. She had Renoed him two years later, taking the kid, and had mar-



ried Paul Bean, but the arrangement had been friendly, and it had not interfered with his relations with old Dan.

It would not be an overstatement to say that any tough police sergeant who had got his the hard way had never been able to regard the idea of a Tuxedo Cop with anything but an extreme impassivity of face—Tuxedo Johnny Blythe possibly even more than the rest, with his plump, pink-cheeked, surprised and round-eyed look, resembling somewhat the look of a plump good-natured nine-months-old baby examining a feather. No doubt in many ways he was something of a fathead. He wasn't quite a walrus-mustached, heel-clicking comedy Keystone Cop, however, and had never been quite that bad. At least he had had a certain amount of police training and with it he still retained an underlying police awareness, however confused. If there were some things which he didn't think of, and some things which he failed to see—if, as he felt forced to confess to Big Bat O'Brien later with regret, he had played it dumb—it is doubtful if most men would have acted any more intelligently in the circumstances, and perhaps the average not quite so well.

Even in his agitation he was automatically recording everything in the halls and on the stairs, as he went down, but there were no shadows that were tangible. Just empty pockets of darkness. The apartment doors on each floor had been closed—behind one, the murmur of a man's droning voice, perhaps a radio newscaster; behind another, the sound of dance music. Behind all the other doors, what had seemed only a heavy sleeping silence.

The cables of the elevator had ceased vibrating; it had reached the fifth floor, from which that ring had come. The little marble-tiled lobby seemed deserted. The front doorway was open, and there was no sound of car or footsteps out on the quiet midnight street.

Tuxedo Johnny had headed downstairs to reach the front door as quickly as possible, with the one thought in his mind of seeing someone on the way, or possibly out on the midnight street beyond. He did not continue his rush straight for the door now, however. On the bottom step of the stairs, he stopped.

In the quiet and apparently deserted lobby, he had seen the movement of a shadow. There was someone standing back of one of the pillars. He had stepped behind it rather

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quickly, Tuxedo Johnny thought, just as he himself had come in sight.

The first man he had met since leaving old Dan's door, the thought burned itself into Tuxedo Johnny's mind. He must remember every detail—not forget one.

THE PILLAR didn't hide the man behind it completely. He was a big man, dressed in a blue patrolman's uniform. He had fat hands and wrists beyond the ends of his blue sleeves, and white socks beneath the bottoms of his blue pants.

After a moment, as Tuxedo Johnny Blythe remained halted on the bottom step, looking at him, the man behind the pillar came on out. He swung his stick with measured ease. He had a big hooked nose and a broad face, set with small green sliding eyes. One of the buttons of his tunic was unfastened over his belly, and he made a gesture of buttoning it.

"Evening, Lieutenant Blythe," he said, adjusting the cap.

There were twenty thousand on the force, thought Tuxedo Johnny. He couldn't know them all. The patrolman knew him, anyway.

"Slipsky, sir," said the big patrolman, sliding his eyes. "I used to be on the—under you for a while in the old precinct back in 'twenty-nine, Lieutenant. I'm just, uh, investigating."

"Someone has sent in an alarm already, have they?" said Tuxedo Johnny.

"An alarm?" said Slipsky, his eyes abruptly motionless. "About what, Lieutenant?"

"Old Dan! Dan McCue—wait a minute!" said Tuxedo Johnny haggardly, as Slipsky half wheeled, glancing over his shoulder, as if to bolt headlong out of the door. "Where the devil are you going?"

"No need of going off half-cocked," he added, catching his breath. "We'll have to see what it is first. I may have got a little excited. But he didn't answer the doorbell, and there's blood—blood on the doorknob! But maybe it's not murder. We'll have to see."

"Murder?" said Slipsky, as if he had never heard the word before. "Mr. McCue? When?"

"Someone must have just come from there—"

"I hadn't heard anything about it, Lieutenant," said Slip-sky. "I only just came in the lobby a minute ago. I was just asking Sam Boaz, the elevator man, how things was, only he got a call up. I was just waiting for him to come back down."

"You've been here only a minute?" said Tuxedo Johnny. "Someone might have gone out then—"

"Only a couple of minutes, anyway, Lieutenant. I came in just at midnight, and it's only eleven-fif—well, I guess the clock here's not running. I thought it was. But not more than seven or eight minutes, anyway, Lieutenant."

His wrist watch said 12:12, Tuxedo Johnny saw now, looking at it finally. Even though it might be those five or nine minutes fast, Slipsky must have been here in the lobby for an appreciable number of minutes. The fat patrolman was endeavoring to minimize the time, he realized somewhat tardily. He might have been in here since around 11:50, the time the lobby clock said, or he would have noticed when he came in that it had stopped.

It had probably been just a sense of uneasiness at having been caught loitering with the elevator man which had caused him to step back of the pillar, it occurred to Tuxedo Johnny somewhat belatedly, as well. Just for a moment, in the movement of that shadow, he had thought he had seen something sinister . . .

He recalled Slipsky now vaguely, back over the years. A younger and much thinner cop, though with those same sliding green eyes. His nickname had been Slippery or Slippy. Not a particularly good record, Tuxedo Johnny had an impression—a back-room crap-shooter. Slipsky had once come to him for help in getting himself out of some jam, he thought. Still that made no difference now.

"Forget it, Slippy," he said, taking a breath. "No one could have gone out while you've been here without your seeing him, I suppose?"

But it was an automatic question. The answer was obvious. Bad cop though he had been and still might be, Slippy would have seen anyone going out.

The elevator had come rattling down again. There was no passenger in it. The bald-headed, pan-faced operator stopped it jerkily at the lobby floor and opened the grilled doors.

"That Kitty Weisenkranz's damned brats again!" he said, with a flat glare, stepping out. "They're always sneaking up and ringing the bell from the fifth floor and then beating it down again, or setting fires in the halls or dumping garbage down the shaft, or some other dirty trick like that, damn their slippery hides! Why in hell couldn't their mother have kept them in Chicago? McCue doesn't like them, neither, living right across the hall from him. Some day I'll catch them and carve my initials on them. You know me, Slippy."

The second man he had seen; Tuxedo Johnny ticked him off. Or had met—he had glimpsed the elevator man ascending in the cage as he came down, of course.

"No one on the fifth floor?" he asked automatically.

"That's what I said, sweetheart! Are you waiting to go up?"

"You mustn't mind old Sam, Lieutenant," said Slipsky, sliding his eyes. "Greatest dead-pan kidder you ever saw. A heart of gold. Him and me was roommates for two years at—at a place we used to live at. Lieutenant Blythe belongs to the cops, Sam. He used to be at the old precinct back when I was. He's just been up trying to get into Mr. McCue's apartment, but nobody answers. And there's blood all over the doorknob. He's afraid it looks bad."

"McCue!" said Boaz. "You mean somebody had done him in? Why, God a'mighty, if that ain't tough! You mean you want me to go up and see? I got a pass key, but I'm not supposed to use it without permission—"

"I have a key myself!" said Tuxedo Johnny. "For God's sake, you're new here, or you'd know it. The door is chained on the inside! I couldn't get in. Then when I saw the blood—"

He tried to think. They would have to get in by the back.

"You mean there's somebody still up in the apartment?" said Boaz uneasily. "Do you think we ought to call the cops? Well, hell, of course you're one yourself, Lieutenant. And Slippy Slipsky here—ain't you, Slippy?"

"He must have got out some other way," said Tuxedo Johnny, beginning to get calmed down a little and to think about it. "I'm not a cop myself. I just used to be. When Dan didn't answer and I saw the blood, the first thing I

thought of was the front door, to see if I could catch him. But Slipsky's been here, and he couldn't have come out this way. The door chain answers that, anyway. I guess I didn't think. Who's been up to see Mr. McCue this evening?" he added as an afterthought—it was the police thing to inquire.

"Why, Mr. Bean was up to see him about eleven, but he left some time ago," Boaz said. "He's been his only visitor."

"Paul Bean, his lawyer?" Tuxedo Johnny asked mechanically.

"That's the guy. He brought Mr. McCue up a bottle of champagne. I didn't see him go out, but he generally stays only about half an hour. Father Finley said he had gone, anyway—I forgot about him. I don't know what time he went up. I brought him down maybe twenty or twenty-five minutes ago, though, about a quarter of twelve—he said he'd stopped in for a shave. He's a kind of goofy little guy that's nuts on cats, a friend of Mr. McCue's. He isn't a real priest, I don't think, but that's what he calls himself. He isn't there any more, either, anyway."

"I know him," Tuxedo Johnny said. "He gave Mr. McCue's daughter a cat last year that scratched her and gave her blood poisoning. What other ways are there that anybody could have got away, Boaz? Can you think?"

"Well, there's the rear fire escape. A guy could climb down that, if nobody was out in back to see him."

"Or up and across the roofs, perhaps," said Tuxedo Johnny—never having been up to the Royal Arms roof, but trying now to get a picture of all other possible ways.

"Not that way," said Boaz. "There's an alley between us and the old dump next door that would take a goat to jump. Its roof is two stories lower, anyway. The Susskind loft's on the other side, ten or twelve stories high without a window. If there's been anybody in Mr. McCue's apartment all evening besides Mr. Bean and Father Finley, I guess he either got away down the fire escape, or he didn't get away at all."

"That's what I was trying to get the picture of," said Tuxedo Johnny, drawing a deep breath. "Looks like we'll have to go ahead and get in the back way, Slippy. You've got your gun?"

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"Well, Lieutenant," said Slipsky, sliding his eyes, "that's one of the things—As a matter of fact, I was sort of thinking it might be a good idea for me to kind of go up and keep watch on the front door, or something, while you went around—"

"For God's sake, are you afraid?" said Tuxedo Johnny, not able to believe that Slipsky really was, that even a bad cop could be afraid of anything, though afraid enough himself. "Of course not! You're the patrolman on the beat. You'll have to make entrance with me, to see what we find."

"Perhaps you'd better ring up headquarters right away, Boaz," he added, with an additional flash of police thought, as he was starting for the door. "Get hold of Inspector Bat O'Brien of homicide. Say you're calling for Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, who's just got in from Washington. Tell Big Bat that I'm breaking in with the beat patrolman into Dan McCue's apartment, to investigate what looks like some bad play, after finding the door chained on the inside and no response. Say that I just wanted him to be alerted, in case something has happened to Dan. I'll call him again in a few minutes from Dan's apartment, if it turns out to have been murder."

With no idea that it would be two murders up there. With none that, before very long, there would be a third body lying in the black alley down which he and Slipsky were hurrying in a moment more, towards the fire escape in back.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Over Whose Dead Body

A SCANT THREE or four minutes, or perhaps less, had elapsed since Tuxedo Johnny had left old Dan's door and come rushing down the stairs, with the feel of blood on his hands that was slippery and still warm.

So far he had done and was still doing, it seemed to him, the only thing he could have. Having encountered Slipsky and ascertained that there was no possibility that anyone could have got away out the front door of the building. To have inquired who Dan's visitors had been

tonight, and what other ways out of his apartment there might be. To hurry back to break in with Slipsky. It was just what Big Bat himself would do, he thought, if confronted by blood on a door knob and a chained door.

As yet he had encountered only Slipsky and the pan-faced elevator man. But the whole apartment house couldn't be all asleep. There had been a man's muffled voice behind one door, he remembered, and the sound of dance music behind another. There had been the silences behind the other doors which had almost seemed to shout.

Who lived behind all those doors, those compact and hidden walls, above and below and across from Dan's? Had one of them, on the fourth floor across from Dan's been open just a crack? For the life of him, he could not remember now. He could only remember releasing the knob, with a wild glance around him, looking at his hand with horror, and fleeing.

The anonymity of a city apartment house, where no one knows who lives across the hall! Like the dead within a cemetery. Yet when the trumpet of murder blows, out of their graves they swarm, with staring eyes.

Kitty Weisenkranz's boys, Chicago—suddenly, as he went down the alley, that name which Boaz had spoken clicked in Tuxedo Johnny's mind. Why, she must be Kitty Kane! Kitty Kane—diminutive, black-eyed, and utterly alluring—of the *Jollities* and the Nestor Club, almost twenty years ago.

He had not forgotten her, with her look of a shy young woods dryad and her loving, sinful heart. Eighteen years old, and old as Egypt. He had been wild about her, romantic young sap that he had been. Once, when he had been a young lieutenant, he had jeopardized his career for her, bluffing and bulldozing a visiting Texas oil man into withdrawing a blackmail charge against her which had her caught cold. He had protected her and loved her, though knowing that there were a dozen more. At least she had always cared for him more than the others, who had been just men with dough.

Years ago she had passed out of his life, marrying O.K. Weisenkranz, the big cloak-and-suit man out in Chicago. Weisenkranz had cut his throat a year or two ago in a fit of depression—had been found lying before his bathroom

mirror with his jugular severed and a razor beside him. And though there had been some question as to whether he had been right-handed, and also as to whether a man could so nearly decapitate himself, the verdict had ultimately been suicide. Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had heard the details from Big Bat O'Brien, who had known Kitty, too.

A vital image—a still remembered flame. She would be thirty-six or seven now, and with her two boys by Weisenkranz. But her slender burning beauty could have hardly changed. She was the sort of girl who would never grow old. She must have come back to New York fairly recently, to live in the Royal Arms here, right across the hall from old Dan's apartment, Boaz had said. At this very moment not far away from him, perhaps, alive and breathing and awake.

*I wonder if she would remember me still?* thought Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, with a pounding of his heart. And knew the answer as he asked the question: *Of course! Of course she would . . .*

"Jeez!" Slipsky croaked behind him, stumbling against an ash can with a bang. "There goes another one! I don't see how you can see, Lieutenant. It's darker than the bottom of the ink. Cripes! Was that another dead cat?"

Kitty Kane!

\* \* \*

THEY HAD COME to the spiked iron fence that enclosed the rear areaway of the Royal Arms. Tuxedo Johnny Blythe found the latch of the gate. With Slipsky at his heels, he pushed on through.

The small high silver moon, just tipping past the edge of the tall surrounding roofs, shone down on the pavement in a crazy rhomboid design, with sharp rectangular edges of blackness. There was a square of yellow light from the rear basement door, standing open, with a vista of rows of ash cans and a boilerroom inside. A grilled fire escape zigzagged up the rear brick wall, its bottom ladder moored by chains to hooks against the wall.

A red eye seemed to brighten and glow a moment in the black edge of the areaway, near the light of the basement door.

"Rasmussen?" said Slipsky, in a croak.

"Ya."



"What are you doing there, Swede?"

"Smoking mine pipe."

"How long have you been out here?"

"About ten minutes."

"Swede Rasmussen, the janitor, Lieutenant," said Slipsky, panting. "He's a friend of old Sam Boaz's, too. He lives on the ground floor at the back."

"The janitor? That's who I thought it probably was," said Tuxedo Johnny, with an unavoidable croak himself.

The janitor of the Royal Arms came forward into the yellow basement door light—a small hunchbacked figure, dragging one leg after him, with a slow deliberate twisting of his hip. He had a dark ridge of hair like a clipped horse's mane, and a dish-shaped face set with deep sockets, out of which peered his burning eyes, behind slow smoke.

*The third man, thought Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, I've seen since leaving old Dan's door.*

"This is Lieutenant Blythe, Swede," said Slipsky. "He thinks we ought to climb up to Mr. McCue's apartment and investigate. There's blood on his doorknob and nobody answers. The door is chained on the inside."

"Ya?"

"You've been out here fifteen minutes, Rasmussen?" said Tuxedo Johnny, watching those burning eyes. "Happen to see anything?"

Rasmussen sucked his pipe to a red glow.

"Vot sort of ding?" he said.

"Anything particular. I thought if there was something wrong with his apartment—"

"Dere is nutting wrong vit' McCue's apartment dot I know of," said Rasmussen, smoking. "Maybe a faucet vasher needs fixing, dot iss all."

Tuxedo Johnny looked at him a moment. "All right."

"Lieutenant Blythe means about the old man himself, Swede," said Slipsky uneasily. "I know you, you cagey old coot. You like to have it dragged out of you. What do you know about Mr. McCue?"

"McCue?"

"For hell's sake, Swede!"

Rasmussen took his pipe out of his mouth.

"McCue iss dead," he stated.

"How do you know?" said Tuxedo Johnny. "Have you been up there? Where have you been?"

"Here," said Rasmussen, putting his pipe back in his mouth. "Yoost here, Mr. Policeman. Out smoking mine pipe and looking up at det moon. But I see McCue's lights go out not fife or six minutes ago. And den I see dot deffil flying out det vindow."

"What devil?"

Rasmussen sucked his pipe to a glow.

"I see det vindow slide up vidout no noise," he said. "I see dot deffil creeping out on det fire escape, like he vas going to fly away. *Ya, ya*, I say to mineself! *Ya, ya*, I know who you are yet, Mr. Deffil, and I know vot you haf been doing!"

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe felt a coldness rushing down his spine. The burning eyes of the hunchbacked man were uncanny and inhuman. His thick guttural voice wasn't man-like. He looked like a demon himself. Like the living fiend. "You saw some man you knew leaving Mr. McCue's apartment a few minutes ago, Swede?" said Slipsky uneasily, asking the question which Tuxedo Johnny Blythe might have asked but for the coldness of his tongue.

"*Nei*," said Rasmussen, smoking.

"I thought you said you knew him, Swede—"

"*Ya*." He pulled on his pipe once more, deliberately. "It vass neider man nor voman," he stated. "It vas nuttings human, but it vass det Old Vun out of hell dot had come to get his own. "He valketh up and down like a raging lion, seeking vot he may devour," det Book says. Det soul of dot bad old man has belonged to him already. And ven I see him coming from det vindow, dere is someding comes and tells me inside here—" he rapped his knuckles—"dot old Dan McCue vill nefer bodder mine daughter Hulda, and try to make her take a drink vit him ven she goes up to clean his apartment. Climb up, and break in all you vant, if you do not belief me. You vill find der Old Vun inside vit him, munching on his bones. It iss too late, yentelmen."

He put his pipe into his mouth and puffed contentedly, with his hands behind him.

*Cracked!* thought Tuxedo Johnny Blythe. He felt a crazed desire to laugh, on the rebound. The janitor's weird portentous manner and glaring eyes had almost

made him believe in the devil, himself. But Rasmussen was just a crackpot with a religious streak, enjoying being important and the center of attention. The preposterous exaggeration of the gnome man was a relief in itself. It mustn't be anywhere near as bad as he had thought, Tuxedo Johnny told himself. He felt himself, for the first time, curiously steadied.

"You mean he's still in there?"

"Ya. He did not fly away. Ven he looked down and saw me standing smoking mine pipe and vatching up at him, he yumped back in, vidout no sound, and closed det vindow quick. Vy? I had mine Testament in mine hip pocket. It took det vind out of his sails. He could not pass it. He vent pack to finish his meal and vait for me to go away. But I haf been vatching."

"How do you reach the fire escape, Swede?" said Slip-sky, looking up uneasily.

"I don't," said the lame janitor. He took his pipe out of his mouth. "You can go in det basement and up to mine apartment, and out through Hulda's vindow," he said. "She hass gone to midnight church, so it iss all right. If you do not belief me."

But Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had already turned to the high spiked fence that enclosed the areaway, where it joined the rear wall. He stepped up on the horizontal crossbar of the fence halfway up, and reached up to the bottom of the slanted iron escape ladder, which overhung the building corner.

Holding it by his finger tips to steady himself, he stepped to the top of the fence, from where it was only another four-foot stretch up onto the moored-up ladder. He made it, with a voiceless little grunt, and went along the edges of the ladder steps to the first floor landing. Slipsky, as a qualified flatfoot, though a few years older than he was and overbellied, could make it with even less effort, he thought.

SLIPSKY DIDN'T, though. As Tuxedo Johnny Blythe paused on the landing, he saw the shoulders and padded hind-quarters of the overgrown patrolman disappearing into the basement doorway underfoot.

"Iss too fat," said Rasmussen below. Pulling on his pipe and looking up, he followed Slipsky in. "Slippy iss afraid

he would split his breeches. Iss going up t'rough mine apartment, mine girl Hulda's room. He vill make it yoost as quick."

The lame gnome went in, closing the basement door behind him. Without that yellow light it was dark as pitch now in the areaway, though the escape above was visible against the lighter sky. Tuxedo Johnny sweated.

Slipsky did make it as quickly, perhaps, or quicker than he could have climbed the fence. After thirty or forty seconds the door of a bedroom, beyond the dark open window beside the first floor landing, was flung open, emitting a strafe of light from a hall beyond, and Slipsky's bulky form came tiptoeing across the semi-obscurity of the room, with the gnome janitor standing smoking at the door behind him.

If Slipsky had quit, if he had fled, Tuxedo Johnny would not have gone on up alone. He would have quit, would have fled with him—his tautened nerves cried out to. But Slipsky, though uneager, was the solid blue-clad law. To Slipsky, he was still to an extent the law himself, he understood in part, though not too comprehensively. As the overbellied patrol man stepped out over the window ledge with a sighing groan, Tuxedo Johnny Blythe was already starting on up.

No one shouted out at him; no one, awakened previously by any sound from Dan McCue's above, was starting forth in terror. Incredible that anything had happened to Dan within the last half dozen minutes. Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had a crazy feeling that he had been fantastically mistaken, that it was all a dream. But the feel of the blood was still upon his hand, and on his mind the terrible silence there had been in old Dan's apartment.

Half a flight behind him, the iron steps punged to Slipsky's more solid tread and Slipsky's blue-clad form was a black bulk in the night. He was real, anyway. Slipsky at least was real. He was not a dream walking up the iron stairs.

His wrist watch said 12:18 when he reached the fourth floor landing, outside old Dan's dark moon-gleaming library window. Tuxedo Johnny pressed his face against the glass. He could see something white upon the floor inside, like a man's white face . . . No, it was a piece of paper or

a cocktail napkin, probably. Dead men's faces are not as white as that.

There was a silence beyond the window. He could hear only the *thump-thump-thump* of his own pulse. Yet for an instant he had a ghastly feeling of some living, creeping presence beyond the dark glass. Of something breathing mutely, with strangled breath, more terrible than the dead.

Slipsky had mounted up beside him. "See anything, Lieutenant?"

"It looks like Danny lying on the floor over by the desk," Tuxedo Johnny muttered with a dry croak.

"Think someone's still in there?" Slipsky breathed.

"Not a chance," muttered Tuxedo Johnny putting on a show of steadiness he did not feel. "For a moment I had a sort of notion—but there isn't anybody. Take your stick and smash the pane above the glass. We've got to get in."

"It mayn't be locked," said Slipsky.

He pushed the edge of the sash with his big pudgy fingers, trying it. But it was locked. Gripping his nightstick by the middle, he drove the end of it at the lower edge of the upper pane. The glass crashed, with a sharp, momentous sound, as a third of the pane fell away in shards. Slipsky reached in, turning the catch.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Cutting Kill

OLD DAN McCUE's body lay sprawled on his five thousand dollar Bokhara rug inside in the darkness, beside his eighteen hundred dollar inlaid satinwood Louis Quinze desk. Tuxedo Johnny Blythe knew that he was dead. He stopped three feet away in the darkness only for a moment, to be careful to skirt him, on his way across the room.

"Beside the desk!" he said with a croak. "There's glass on the rug. Come on in, Slippy. Watch your step. I'll find the light switch. There's a telephone on the desk. You can call up police headquarters. I'll see if the front door's still chained."

He had gone on across the room to the doorway out to the hall. He found the light switch beside the door and snapped it on. He glanced back over his shoulder in the flood of light which filled the room now. Old Dan lay on his face in his green silk dressing gown. His big freckled hands clutched at the rug. The blows had all struck the back of his head. Any one of them should have been enough to have dealt death, it would seem, but perhaps the first one or two hadn't stopped his tough old heart completely. So there had been a torrent of furious blows and now his grey hair mingled with bone and blood and with the marks of other ill-aimed senseless blows which, missing his occiput, had ripped his jawbone from behind and almost torn off one ear.

The neck of the heavy wine bottle was lying beside him, still with the pink ribbon on it, and the brass fireside poker at his feet. The thick glass had shattered into a score of segments, spilling champagne over the desk and blotter. The poker had done the most of it.

The dark stain seemed to be still spreading into the rug, soaking wider. There he lay. It was worse than Tuxedo Johnny had imagined. Slipsky looked green about his carp-like gills.

"Call up homicide and make it official," repeated Tuxedo Johnny, swallowing. "We can't touch anything. Let Big Bat get the picture as it lies."

He went out into the hall, partially lit by the living room light, toward the front door, stepping swiftly on the waxed mirror-like parquet floor scattered with small silky rugs. The doorways of the dark kitchen and dining room were to his left, of the bedroom to his right. They were all open and unbreathing as he passed, and there was darkness beyond them. There was a faint rustling from the blackness of kitchen or dining room, but that was all.

There was a door chain, which he had not been certain of. It was hooked across the door.

Tuxedo Johnny stood staring at it from three feet away. There must be other ways out of the apartment. He felt and heard the hot breathing of Slipsky on his neck. The overgrown patrolman hadn't paused to telephone, but had dogged him out, in sheer funk at being left alone in that room of rich, quiet death.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant?" Slipsky breathed. "Chain's still on, is it?"

Tuxedo Johnny put out a hand and felt it, tugging at it. It was metal, and tight within its groove.

"Yes," he said. "It seems to be—"

There rose a scream, shrill, terrified and appalling, from somewhere near. From one of those black doorways they had passed.

"Oh, cripes!" said Tuxedo Johnny, with sagging knees.

The stillness of the death apartment rang with that appalling shriek. It was enough to wake the dead, it would have seemed. There was a crash, as of glass shattering, after what seemed an incredible time, yet which must have been immediately.

"Did you hear that, Lieutenant?" mouthed Slipsky. "Lieutenant, did you hear that? He's still in here!"

Did he hear that! The dead in hell could hear it. Tuxedo Johnny turned, stiffening his knees. "Try the kitchen, Slipsky!" he managed. "I'll try the bedroom."

He put a hand on Slipsky's jellied chest, half pushing him out of the way. He plunged back down the hall, skidding and staggering as one of the small rugs slipped out from underneath him. With his left hand fending out, he struck against the gilt rope-framed mirror that hung on the wall, banging his cheek against the glass and knocking it askew. Half sprawling, recovering balance, he veered left into the blackness beyond the bedroom doorway.

There was nothing moving in the room, it seemed. Yet there was something breathing in it with him. The scream had come from in here. There was a liquid gurgling sound. He went swiftly, feeling with his hands, as in a terrible game of blind man's bluff. Across the room, beyond the foot of the massive bed, near the threshold of the bathroom door he felt something intangibly soft crush beneath his feet, and smelled the terrible fragrance of roses. He heard a bubbling or a breathing from the floor. His foot touched, with a sense of uncontrollable horror, the soft yielding body of the woman who had screamed.

The window shades were drawn, and the bedroom was all in blackness. But in the bathroom there was a small high frosted pane without a shade, open a little at the top. The dim obscurity which came in through it could not

be called light. It was only the darkness of the midnight sky without, over the roof of the next building. Still over a brief area of the floor around the threshold it was a little lighter than nothing.

She was lying across the bathroom threshold—her slender body in some kind of silk Chinese lounging gown—her ghostly bloodless face and black mop of hair upon the white tiles of the bathroom floor. There was the feel of broken glass, that gurgling sound, the terrible smell of white roses, as on a bier.

*Kitty Kane!* thought Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, with a spasm of unparalleled horror. Beautiful, alluring Kitty Kane.

For an instant he had dropped on one knee beside her, feeling the broken glass and a wetness through the fabric on his kneecap. Her pale face was in shadow, all the rest of her in darkness. But there was something remembered in her pose which would have told him who she was even without the faintest light at all, even in the blackest blackness. Some line of the outflung arm, of the curved flung hip, the straight graceful silken legs—even now. Her dark staring eyes were on him. His lips were half parted; her throat seemed to be pulsing and breathing, as if to cry out again at the horror she had seen. And was perhaps still seeing. His hands reached swiftly for her. How warm, how warm she was! Kitty Kane. Like a girl still in the darkness. Like the girl with warm remembered breath that she had been at eighteen. Moments of hot youth flashed swiftly back to him. But she would never know him now. Never again . . .

"Found her, Lieutenant?" gasped Slipsky from the doorway of the room. "Where is he? O God, I feel him creeping! Hello, Lieutenant Blythe! Are you in there? Where are the lights?"

"She's—dead," said Tuxedo Johnny.

He got himself under control. For the moment he had forgotten everything else but her. Had forgotten that there was anyone else in the apartment, even blue-clad Slipsky. On his feet again, his mind working, he turned towards Slipsky, who stood warily crowding the doorway with his big-bellied bulk.

"Hall light switch by the front door, Slipsky!" he managed. "I'll try to find a light in here. Could he—"



He had started to ask, "Could he have got out of the bedroom past you?" But he knew the answer to that, he thought. Slipsky had been right there.

There must be a lamp somewhere in the room. Two or three, or maybe half a dozen. One of his swiftly groping hands struck the shade of a standing bridge lamp as he swept them out, back of a lounge chair within arm's length of him.

"Something's the matter with it, Slipsky! Bulb's been unscrewed, it looks like—"

That terrible smell of roses, that terrible gurgling.

Slipsky flashed on the hall light outside. He had found the switch by the front door with palsied hands. The blackness in the bedroom of death seemed to split apart in shadows that leaped and rushed in headlong frantic race, like a flock of shadowy greyhounds, like wild horses rushing darkly. Over huge bed, bureau, dark silver gleam of mirrors, an open closet door with dark suits hanging, those shadows rushed. A glimpse, Tuxedo Johnny had from the edges of his eyes, of that motionless, bloodless form lying on the floor just back of him. . . . He had got the lamp bulb screwed in then at eternal last, though it had been only seconds. He snapped the switch. A flash and again the blackness.

The fuse had blown. The hall, too, was in blackness. The library lights still seemed to be on, though, on a different circuit, down at the end of the hall.

He heard the wail of sirens out in the night. From blocks away, and nearer. They were coming wailing up from all directions. The scream of brakes, the slam of opening car doors. Men's voices, and the thud of feet down the black alley below, towards the back.

Boaz, the pan-faced elevator man, calling Big Bat O'Brien at headquarters, had not merely alerted homicide, but summoned it. The police were here.

SLIPSKY HADN'T remained by the front door. At that sudden blackness he had bolted. As Tuxedo Johnny Blythe came out of the bedroom, he heard the panic-stricken tread of the big-bellied man thudding down the fire escape in back.

He ran back through the lighted library to the fire escape window. He saw Slipsky's vague dark bulk descend-

ing like a galumphing elephant a flight and a half below, with a flash of white socks beneath his flapping pants legs, with a spreading white slice down his back where his tunic had split apart.

The death still lurking in old Dan McCue's apartment, or else those howling sirens, must have drained the last drop from Slipsky's heart. Tuxedo Johnny didn't blame him. He would have like to flee, too. But he had fled once already, from the front door, even more brainlessly. He picked up the telephone from the desk edge, above old Dan's sprawled head, and dialed the operator with a swift finger flick.

A thought flashed to him. Perhaps she had heard something over the phone placed so quietly on the edge of old Dan's desk, just above his head.

"This is the police," he said. "There's been a murder here. Do you remember noticing any calls over this phone in the past fifteen minutes?"

"There was an uncompleted call at twelve-o-thurree," she said alertly. "I don't know what number they were calling, though. A man just said 'Hello,' and then there was a sort of moan and bump. The phone was hung up again two or three seconds later, so I thought it was all right. I just happened to notice the time—twelve-o-three. It seemed sort of coincidence, the number being one-two-o-thurree. If that helps—"

"Thanks," he said, and set the instrument down again.

The precise time to the minute could hardly make any difference. Big Bat might like to have it, anyway. His wrist watch said twenty-two minutes past midnight now, but the actual time was probably not much more than a quarter after. Two murders within a dozen minutes.

There was a ringing of the doorbell. He ran down the semi-lit hall to unhook the door chain, which he had failed to slip off. As he passed the doorway of the dark bedroom he felt his feet slip again on one of the misplaced little rugs, and more violently than before.

He sprawled sideways, thrusting out his right hand. Against his palm he felt something like a rope. Something heavy and flashing silver bright came down and struck the side of his head a blinding blow, and he fell headlong to the floor, with the crash of shattering glass about him.

WITHIN SECONDS, it seemed, the police had come all around the Royal Arms.

Running back down the alley from their cars, some of them were out in the rear areaway before Slipsky, breathless and sweating, had delivered his carcass down the fire escape. They swarmed up from the fence at the corner of the building to the moored ladder, and along it to the first floor landing of the escape, pushing aside the lame gnome janitor who stood on it, baffled, smoking his pipe, and catching Slipsky by the splitting seat of his pants just as he was heaving his fat bulk into the janitor's daughter's window. Others, plainclothesmen who had come from the precinct house around the corner on Second Avenue, had actually been in the lobby down below, looking for the elevator man who had phoned in the alarm to headquarters, when that mortal scream had sounded. Piling into the elevator or running up the stairs, they were at the door or near it when Tuxedo Johnny fell in the hall inside, with that crash of glass.

The squad car men who swarmed up the fire escape let in the precinct men at the front door. They weren't homicide men. They were men with guns, however. They made an immediate search of the apartment, using flashes in the bedroom and turning on all lights in dining room and kitchen.

Room by room, and closet by closet—the two bedroom closets, the rather large and deep hall coat closet, the linen closet, the broom closet in the kitchen. Behind the couches in the living room, behind all chairs. But there was nothing larger than a mouse in the wastepaper basket in the kitchen. It leaped out, with the cunning and terror of its rodent kind, when the hunt drew near the basket, but one of the squad car men snapped his foot down on it as it hit the floor, and it died with a thin shriek.

There was the front door, and there was the fire escape window. But there had been no one on the escape when they had hurried back except the lame janitor on the first floor landing smoking his pipe and looking up, and Slipsky, frantically descending. As for the front door, its chain had been on.

There were the various windows, of library, dining room, and kitchen, as well as of the black murder bed-

room itself. There were fifteen of them altogether, facing the side alley and the rear of the building and an air-shaft in the kitchen, but all had bars. They tried even those that were closed, slamming them up and shaking the solid bars, but all were immovable. There was the little frosted bathroom window without bars, but it was only about sixteen inches wide, and high up, and open only about six inches from the top. Even at the widest, either pane would give a clearance of only about twelve inches.

They played their flashes on it from the bedroom, and all around inside the bathroom, at the shower curtain, and through the crack of the door, not crossing that black-eyed woman's body lying on the threshold. But there was no one in the bathroom, and no way out of it, just at sight.

No way out, it seemed, at all.

"No dumbwaiter? No fire door into the next building or apartment?" said Tuxedo Johnny Blythe with dazed eyes. "No bars loose at all?"

"It doesn't look that way, Johnny."

"But you'd think there would be something. The chain was still on the front door?"

"In the groove."

"Maybe he got to the rear of the building while Slipsky and I were fumbling for the lights." He tried to think. "When Slipsky flashed the hall light on, there was a rush of shadows. He might have been among them, if he was quick. Got out and down the fire escape ahead of Slipsky, before you and the boys got out back—"

"This guy Rasmussen was down on the first floor landing, watching up, Johnny. Nobody came out the window here from the time you and Slipsky climbed up and broke in till Slipsky came busting out and down, he says. It's black as sin down there, and you can't see much of anything, looking down. If it hadn't been for Slipsky's split tunic and white socks, you mightn't have seen him yourself. But this Rasmussen could see a figure against the lighter sky, looking up. He's one of these kind of guys that if he had one less brain cell he'd be an idiot. But if he had one more, you might figure he had maybe been looking away just a minute, thinking about something else. When he says nothing came out the window, you know nothing did."

"I guess that's right," said Tuxedo Johnny dazedly.

They had helped him to his feet after they came in. Sitting sprawled on the slippery floor, slammed against the wall. The skidded rug, the shattered mirror.

"He's not here, anyway. You don't think it was him that banged you, Johnny—or did you just slip?"

"I didn't see him. Maybe I slipped, Jim. He must have been gone by then. He must have got away right after he killed her. There must have been some way."

The heavy mirror had grazed his head and the side of his face with a thudding blow. He wiped his palm over his temple and cheek again. Sore and contused, but with no feel of blood. His watch crystal had smashed, and its minute hand had snapped off. But the hour and minute made no difference. It was the seconds, the bare seconds that had passed, from the time when she had screamed and he had found her, to the wailing of the sirens and those rushing feet.

There had to be some way.

"I wouldn't worry about it, anyway, Johnny," said the man named Jim. "He just got away, that's all. Most guys do get away, when you get down to it. It's not one in a hundred that's caught cold—a guy has to be pretty dumb to wait around till the cops come. And this guy looks as if he might have been damned cool-headed and smart. Still he must have left his tracks somewhere—even the smartest do. Big Bat's homicide boys will find them."

They had searched the whole apartment, but there was no one there. They took care to disturb nothing. They did not touch old Dan McCue and they did not touch Kitty Kane, lying supine with flung hip in the darkness where she had fallen, in her red silk Chinese dressing gown, with the ideograph embroidered on it which means "Good Luck"—with the old-fashioned ebony-handled straight razor from the bathroom shelf above her head lying beside her black hair in the warm red pool that was still creeping on the tiles.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Face

BIG BAT O'BRIEN appeared with his cohorts in a few minutes more.

"Bring in Paul Bean and Father Finley," he gave his commands as he came highballing in the door. "Any other visitors that Dan may have had tonight that anybody knows about. Any men that Kitty's been playing around with lately. Maybe letters in her apartment. Get the pass-key off that elevator man, Boaz, who was picked up lamming down the street. Or maybe the janitor has one.

"When I think of it," Big Bat added, "Kitty has probably had her two boys living with her recently. A couple of mug-faced brats about fifteen or sixteen, jive-happy little hellions. They were up before the judge out in Chicago for petty thieving and sending in false alarms, before Kitty came back East. Were under investigation in connection with their old man's death two or three years ago, too. Pretty young then, but some boys can be damned bloody to their fathers. They've made Kitty's life a hell. Get the little darlings up and see if they know what time she left her apartment, if they aren't out themselves violating the Cinderella law at some jivehole."

With his hat pushed on the back of his crisp red curls and shiny pate, carrying his big paunch nimbly on the balls of his small feet like a man eternally tiptoeing, Big Bat paused to slap Tuxedo Johnny Blythe on the shoulder on his way to the living room.

"Stealing my stuff, Johnny?" he giped. "You always wanted to be a homicide sleuth. Now you're it. Headquarters got word that you were busting in with the patrolman on the beat. Precinct reported that the beat patrolman was at his box on Park. Didn't you even notice that Slip-sky's uniform wouldn't button around his belly? White socks! A fat cop spreading out of his pants, without a shield! And you had to call on him to help you break in on murder!"

"Do you mean, Bat—" said Tuxedo Johnny palely. "But he knew me. And I remembered—"

"Hell, the guy hasn't been on the force for fourteen years. He's done time up the river. He was with you when Kitty got it, anyway, like he claims—you're sure of it? Yeah, I guess he must have been. Anybody would sure remember it if he had been left alone at a time like that, with one murder already in the apartment. He couldn't have been in on it. He's just a fat punk. In some lousy shakedown racket with this bird Boaz, it sounds like, from the squawk he made. This janitor, Rasmussen, thought that Dan was trying to get gay with his daughter, it seems like. Rasmussen is a nut. Dan may have offered the cock-eyed dame a drink and pinched her cheek, as he would with any colleen. But Boaz believed the nut, and thought he saw a chance to ring in his old cell-mate Slip-sky in his outgrown moth-eaten uniform for a shakedown. Hell, Dan would have pitched them both out the window. But you had to swallow the clown. Didn't you know he didn't even have a gun? But for the grace of God and there being two of you, you might be lying here in the dark yourself with old Dan and Kitty!"

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe's face was filled with wax. "I played it dumb, Bat."

"That's all right, Johnny. You got the boys here quick, anyway. You did fine. I always said you'd make a cop some day."

Swiftly and nimbly on his small feet, Big Bat proceeded on to the doorway of the living room. His eternal smile was on his shrewd shiny face. His tiny green eyes twinkled like emeralds, bright and hard. The fingerprint men and police photographers had already set to work.

"What's the print picture so far?" he said.

"Four highball glasses, inspector. One on the cellaret top with a fresh drink in it, ice not yet all melted, as if Dan had just mixed it. One beside it, empty, with only his own prints, too. One on the little smoking table beside one of the fireplace chairs, half empty, with his fingerprints on it and somebody else's—A's. One on the rug by the chair, on its side and empty, with his fingerprints and another guy's—B's—smeared over."

"Smeared over—you mean somebody tried to wipe his prints off?"

"No. You can still make out enough so that they can be identified. They were just overlaid. It looks more like

three people had handled the glass—old Dan and this guy B who had the partial prints, and then some guy with gloves. There's a white ring on the desk like maybe he had picked up the glass from there."

"Gloves, eh?" said Big Bat, frowning. "That's the picture?"

"It looks that way, inspector. We aren't going to get any prints that matter, it looks like. Just A's and B's, and this guy with gloves."

"Get at the pieces of the champagne bottle and the poker handle. At that razor, too."

The prints on one glass, A's or B's, must be Paul Bean's, Big Bat thought.

"Let's see," he mused. "Three visitors, and the third one was the killer. He must have been some guy Dan would expect to wear gloves for some reason—even on a warm September night. Or maybe they were bandages—he could explain to Dan that he had hurt his hands. So he picked up some other guy's drink and gulped it down before he killed him, with his gloves or bandages on. And dropped it, and picked up the bottle."

He would have used gloves or bandages with that razor, too, thought Big Bat.

He examined the ashtrays in the room, moving about swiftly, touching nothing. One had four of old Dan's own Havana butts and a little hill of white ashes in it. The other ashtray had a Happy cigarette butt lying on a lump of pipe dottle.

The cigar butt at the bottom would be Paul Bean's—one that Dan had given him. He had been here first and he smoked cigars. The dottle would be Finley's who had been in next, and smoked foul shag. The cigarette might have been Kitty's, but wasn't. No lipstick on the Happy. It had been smoked by a man. A man who smokes cigarettes doesn't smoke a pipe or cigars. Though a man who smokes a pipe or cigars may occasionally smoke a cigarette, particularly when the time is brief, and he is keyed up or tense. Keyed up to murder.

"Hey, Cark!" he said. "Pick up this butt and see what you can get from it, will you?"

But there would be no fingerprints on the butt.

Big Bat threw his cigar stump away in the ashes of the fireplace. With his thumbnail he flipped up the lid of the



silver humidor on old Dan's desk and selected a corona, fingering it for texture. He didn't like to picture, he didn't try, what had been happening in those intervening minutes, in the black apartment, before Johnny and Slipsky had broken in.

"Let's see her now, boy," he said to Tuxedo Johnny.

"I can give you the exact time of Dan's murder, Bat," Tuxedo Johnny said apologetically, as they went down the hall. "It was just three minutes after midnight. Dan tried to put in a phone call for help at that time. The operator heard a kind of groan and bump as he dropped it, but that was all. It was hung up again in a couple of seconds, and she didn't think enough of it to report it. But she did happen to notice the time—One-two-o-three calling at twelve-o-three."

Big Bat nodded absently.

"Good boy," he said. "You'll make a homicide man yet, Johnny. You and the operator. Probably doesn't make any difference, the exact minute. But it does no harm to know."

He was thinking of something else, however, as he chewed old Dan's corona. Of that prize pair, Slipsky and Boaz, Johnny had played it dumb.

THERE WERE cops in the areaway out back, and cops in the alley, and cops down in the basement and in the lobby and all the halls. There were cops looking over the water tank and chimney-pots of the roof, two stories up. For twenty minutes the Royal Arms had been cut off, from within a few seconds of that second murder. The police were completing the work of arousing those denizens who, thanks to deafness or sleeping pills or drink, had been spared the hearing of that appalling scream.

The blown fuse had been replaced, and the bedroom was bright with lights now. All bulbs had been removed and substituted. Only the bridge lamp nearest to that murdered girl, which Tuxedo Johnny had groped for desperately and found, had been tampered with, however—with the burnt penny in the socket that had been expected. A scattering of three or four small coins about upon the rug might indicate that the killer had intended to fix more, but that there had not been time. They might, though, merely have been spilled from a hasty, fumbling

glove or bandage—that one lamp had been enough to flash the lights out for his getaway.

Only, nobody had yet figured how.

Adjacent to the lamp there was only one of the barred bedroom windows, however, closed and locked. It was near the bathroom door, too, of course, but there had been no one in the bathroom and no egress from it, the precinct men had decided, probing it with their flashlights from beyond the sill.

Yet he must have been here, within reach of that lamp, with hot murder in him, ready to flash it if necessary—only Tuxedo Johnny had saved him the effort, by finding it and doing it for him.

A plainclothesman was sitting on an ottoman, reading a comic. He stood up. Tuxedo Johnny Blythe took off his hat, which had saved him in part from the force of that crashing mirror blow, and brushed his thin brown, neatly parted hair on his plump head.

Big Bat O'Brien squatted on his hams, pushing his own hat farther back on his tonsured red curls. He looked down, with Tuxedo Johnny standing beside him, at the woman who had once been Kitty Kane, little Kitty Kane of Jerome Street, Kitty Kane of the Nestor Club and the *Jollities*, with the broken glass beside her on the waxed hardwood floor edge, and the spilled white roses. With her gaping throat upon the white tiles just across the threshold, and her black eyes staring up yet at some unnamed terror, at the terror in the blackness which had taken her off.

Staring, staring with her dead eyes up at Big Bat O'Brien and Tuxedo Johnny Blythe. But she did not speak.

"She used to play with my kid sisters," said the murder man heavily. "Right down the next block on Jerome Street. Her mother was black-eyed Kitty Shawn of Shannon, that was a friend of Dan McCue's. She died when Kitty was born. Bill Kane, her old man, worked for Dan. He took to the drink. Was she an eyeful as a kid! God, were all the boys nuts about her in the old days! But you had all the play, Johnny. You were the only one she ever really loved. You were honeymooning, and you never knew, but she went on the tear for a month after you married Sue McCue. The Tenderloin boys used to pick her

up in the gutter. She didn't care what she did; she was crazy. But that's the way things go.

"Kitty Kane!" he repeated heavily. "She was wild, she was wild all through. The wildest kid on Jerome Street. But she was always a square-shooter with her friends. She never let a pal down, or did him dirt. Whatever she was or did, she never deserved this. It was as damned hellish a piece of business as I've ever run up against, and I've seen plenty. It was a black way for Kitty Kane to die . . . God, but the way she keeps looking up at you!"

"If she hadn't screamed!" said Tuxedo Johnny. "It was the way she screamed!"

"I know. I know, Johnny. You might sort of hope she hadn't known what she was up against here in the dark, if it hadn't been for that. I'm glad I wasn't where I could hear her. I'll always be glad. But I'll be gladder yet when I meet the black son of hell who made her scream like that. It must have been an awful moment for you when you found her, Johnny."

"The worst I've ever known, Bat." Tuxedo Johnny said with a constricted throat.

With hard bright eyes Big Bat O'Brien had taken in the shattered amber vase glass, the water pooled on the hardwood floor, and the wet stems of the roses. The hollow-ground straight razor lying near her head, across the threshold, with its red blade open. The pool of blood on the white tiles.

"Looks like she knocked the vase off from somewhere when he got her," he said. "White roses were always Dan's favourite flower. I remember the blanket of them he had for Kitty Shawn of Shannon. That was all of thirty-six years ago, and I was only a boy of eight then, but I still remember them. They were the talk of Jerome Street, Dan's roses, and Mrs. Kane did look beautiful. He couldn't have had much money then, Dan couldn't, and what he had he got the hard way, with his hands. But he went all out for those white roses for her who had been Kitty Shawn of Shannon."

One of the fingerprint men had come in to take the razor. Big Bat arose and inched on past that red-clad form into the bathroom, pulling on the light cord with a big red-haired hand. Tuxedo Johnny followed him.

"Where do you suppose the razor came from, Bat?" Tuxedo Johnny said with a dry throat.

"Danny always used a straight razor—didn't you ever notice, Johnny? You must have seen him a hundred times. He had a case of them that his father had brought from the old country. He would generally keep one out and use it till it had lost its edge, then put it away and use another one, before sending four or five of them to the barber to be honed. Probably it was lying here on the glass shelf right beside the brush and soap. Maybe he picked it up as she came out of the door, and he grabbed her wrist and forced it across her throat. Or . . .

"No, they couldn't have been struggling very long," he amended it. "She didn't have it in her hand at all. She had that bowl of flowers in her hand, Johnny. There isn't any table or anything else around where it could have been knocked from. It just comes back to me, too, that tomorrow would have been old Dan's birthday—the 17th of September, he'd have been sixty-one or sixty-two. That's it! Dan's birthday. Maybe Kitty brought those roses over to give him after Finley left, before the murderer came in and chained the door.

"Maybe old Dan gave her the vase to put them in, or maybe she had come into the bedroom first and picked one up, one she knew about, and gone on into the bathroom here to put them in water before giving them to him. She must have been in here, anyway; almost up to the moment of her death. A woman can spend a lot of time in a bathroom, if maybe she happens to look at herself in the mirror and decides to put another curl in her hair. She didn't know the killer had come in, and he didn't know that she was here.

"She was in the way of the killer's escape, it looks like. He had probably come in off the fire escape, the same way you and Slipsky did, Johnny. It was easy and natural, so long as there was no one out there to see him. He had probably expected to get out the same way, too. He doused the lights after killing Dan, and started to. He was that devil Rasmussen saw starting out on the fire escape. When he saw the light of the basement door down below and the glow of Rasmussen's pipe in the blackness near it, he bolted back in, though, and closed and locked the window if Rasmussen should come up to investigate.

"He had another way figured out to get away, of course, just in case there might be somebody down below like that. Even a goon would have another way figured out, a little harder one, maybe, but still a sure way. And he was smart as hell. He shows it by the way he did get out. Having the lamp fixed to douse the lights if necessary, right here by the bathroom door. Maybe he was just fixing it when Kitty came out. No way of saying just when he did it. But right there he met her, at the door. She was in his way, and he killed her.

"You're right, Johnny. You're right as hell, and you've been right, all along. How did he get away? That's really the one question."

Big Bat looked up at the little frosted bathroom window, measuring it dubiously with his eyes.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Moaning Ghost

TUXEDO JOHNNY BLYTHE had been following all the murder man's reflections with strained attention. These horrors were his first experience with red bloody murder, and he hoped sickly that they would be his last. Old Dan had been terrible enough, but Kitty . . .

He had had enough of it, and he was afraid Big Bat would see how sick his nerves were. He had lost his head. He had played it dumb. Perhaps it made no difference what symptoms of calm or panic he showed, of brilliance or dumbness. Big Bat would continue in any case just to think him a tuxedo clown. Still he couldn't just walk out, or collapse like a woman.

He had followed, with a sense of amazement and even awe, the work of the fingerprint men, whose thoroughness and skill were even more intensive than he had believed possible. He had been baffled by some of the obvious things Big Bat had seen, which he himself had missed, and the uncannily accurate pictures which Bat had drawn from them—Big Bat might have almost been there himself, the way he had now figured out that Kitty must have been carrying that vase of flowers, and hadn't just knocked it off some table. And that the flowers had

been a birthday gift for Dan—he had forgotten himself that Dan’s birthday would have been tomorrow.

The problem still remained of how the killer could have got away. Dumb as he had played it, Tuxedo Johnny had seen that from the beginning. Now Bat himself had come to it, as sooner or later he must.

With his baffled gaze, Tuxedo Johnny Blythe followed the murder man’s hard emerald eyes up to the little frosted bathroom window. It was too small, it was high up, with its lower sill more than six feet above the floor, and open only those six inches at the top, for ventilation.

Nevertheless, Tuxedo Johnny stepped up on the rim of the lavatory basin beneath the window, pushing up both panes to the top. With a dry throat, he started forth.

It was a straight drop down to the alley, and must be dismissed as a possibility. There were no similar windows of other apartments below, he remembered—this apartment of Dan’s, the owner’s suite, was built on different dimensions from the rest. And the squad car men had been hurrying down the alley within a fraction of a minute after Kitty’s murder. They would have seen any man who might have cat-climbed down the bricks, or slid down a rope.

Opposite, a dirty window pane showed blank and bare. No shade, no curtains, back of the glass. The opacity of years of dust seemed on it. An emptiness lying behind it. An unbreathing silence.

Tuxedo Johnny felt his stomach muscles knot. There was something inexplicably dismal about that window. Like a great rectangular inhuman eye. Like the blank face of nothing. Like the shape of a grave that is filled with dark earth and a dark water.

With dry lips and knotted muscles he stared.

“How does it look, Johnny?” said Big Bat.

“Empty window across, Bat,” Tuxedo Johnny said, taking a quiet breath. “He was small enough to squirm out the one here, that’s all. He crossed over on a ladder or a board. The precinct boys played it dumb, too. They didn’t even step up and look out. He may have been still crawling across it when they got here. But that’s the way he did it.”

Big Bat stepped up on one light-balled foot beside him. Tuxedo Johnny bent his head aside for Bat to get the picture, too.

"Empty window," mused Big Bat, rubbing his chin, staring with emerald eyes. "A ladder or a board. A little cat-like man, or a long thin man with eel hips and rubber bones.

"Yes, that's got it, Johnny. He hid behind the door or shower-curtain in the bathroom while you were stumbling in and finding her. When you blew the lamp that he had fixed, and went running out again, he stepped out, quick and cool. My God, I take off my hat to him. He thought of everything. He even closed the window part way behind him, to look just natural—a panic-stricken man would have left it open, or would have closed it all the way. And across and in through the window of that empty room, pulling his plank in after him. Then out a deserted flat and down the stairs, and out the entrance next door, while we had the building here surrounded. It's the way he must have done it. It's the only way."

He stepped down to the floor again, did Big Bat, a little heavily.

"Get hold of Jorgensen," he said to the plainclothesman in the bedroom. "Find out if Paul Bean has come back to his apartment yet. If they've traced where Father Finley moved to when he moved out of that dump over in Hell's Kitchen where he was living with all his cats up to a month ago."

One of the fingerprint men had come into the bedroom to report. "We've got the story on the murder weapons, inspector. A's prints are on the neck of the bottle and some of the broken pieces. Smeared over. Dan's and B's prints are on the razor. Smeared over. No prints on the poker except bloody smudges."

"A was Paul Bean, of course," said Big Bat wearily. "He brought the champagne bottle, this bird Boaz says. B was Finley. He came in and got a shave. And one of them, at least, has an alibi that's wonderful and good. Unless there was a living witness.

"Okay, he played it smart. As smart as hell. It happened after he had gone. It was some other guy. He was so damned innocent he even left his prints on one of the murder weapons. Before he put on the bandages or the

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gloves. And there's no way short of hell of telling from the prints which one he was . . . Here's a cake of soap and a towel to give the boys, Fulheimer. But they won't get any prints from them. He probably even washed his hands in gloves, he was that smart. We've found the way he got away, anyway. If that does us any good."

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe gave a last glance at that bare dirty window opposite, before stepping down.

By every look, the room back of it was unoccupied, and had been unoccupied for months, and perhaps years. As empty as the grave. Or more so. Yet as he gave his final glance now, he thought he saw a pallid face looming slowly into view in the depths of darkness back of the glass.

Tuxedo Johnny paused upon one foot, staring, with knotted stomach muscles. It was a face—an apelike ghostly face, with a wide grinning mouth, with juglike ears, with a pair of great moist glistening eyes like the eyes of a lemur. The face swam toward the dirty window pane, staring back at him as he stared out.

The dim face gibbered, grimacing at him. It twisted up in a hideous, formless snarl. It stretched its mouth and twitched its ears. It mocked him, laughing hideously.

"In the name—" Tuxedo Johnny whispered, with his knees like water beneath him.

"What have you got there, Johnny?"

Big Bat O'Brien sprang up beside him again, staring forth, but the leering face had vanished. There was only the blank glass across, dirty and bare.

It had been only an illusion of his febrile and excited brain, Tuxedo Johnny told himself. A phantasm of his racing heart.

"See anyone over there still, Johnny?" Big Bat repeated.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe drew a deep quiet breath. "No," he said. "No one, Bat."

He could not confess having seen that phantasm to Big Bat. He stepped down to the floor again. Yet even in hell he would remember the look of that gibbering, mocking face behind the dingy window across the black alley.

\* \* \*



KERRY OTT, who knew a scene when he saw one, never saw that murder scene. He was never on it. He had not known that there had been murder.

The lights behind the shaded living room windows, down at the back of that apartment across from him, which had gone out when he had been looking forth a few minutes after midnight, had not told him that it was murder. The shadow show upon the wall, the two dark bulks of hurrying Keystone Cops down the black alley, the light which had flashed on behind that frosted little bathroom window opposite, with the glimpse of hand and bare arm he had seen, had had nothing in them of murder.

He did not know that he had had a kind of fluoroscopic glimpse into a murder apartment during a brief period of time while its front door was chained and its rear window was locked, and that he was the only person alive who had had such a glimpse. He did not even hear that girl's mortal scream, within twenty feet of him, when it sounded, though he was even nearer to it in feet than Slipsky and Tuxedo Johnny, and though people five hundred feet away, and down on the next street, heard it.

How long he had been lying on his cot Kerry didn't know. His tired and overstrained mind had been racing with his play . . . Still he must have been asleep, for a brief time, anyway. Something had brought him back into the world of reality in which all men must live, into the world of silence where he always lived, the world of darkness where he was lying now.

Had he felt the faint jar of a footstep on the worn floor? A door-latch click, a window going up? Sounds that he could never hear. He lay with eyes open. The molecular corpuscles of the darkness swam before his eyes like the eyes of deep sea fishes. All the darkness was filled with nothing. With dark grey eyes of nothingness, which floated, and drifted, and paused to stare, and swam on by.

The room was impalpably lighter than when he had lain down. It was still black, but not with an utter blackness. The kind of blackness from which the adage comes, that all cats are grey at night.

His window shade was up—that was it. It could have snapped up, with a worn roller catch, and its jerk could have awakened him. The windows of the apartment

across the alley must be lighted now— though he could not see them where he was, recumbent at the back of his room—since a certain amount of dim light came in his window from across.

He lay motionless, watching. Against the dingy luster of the pane he saw the shadow of the spider, moving and weaving. No living thing visible in all the darkness with him except her, Arachne, shuttling her laddered silk all through the night.

Still there was something else.

He had heard no door click, he had heard no board creak, he had not heard the shade go up, in his eternal silence. Still he had been awakened . . . And then he knew it had been the vibration of a human voice in the closed, unstirring air of the room. Someone was in the darkness with him, and had spoken.

That was always a lost hollow feeling. When he could see a man's lips and face, he had no handicap in his deafness. But the vibration of a voice in darkness, not knowing whether it had spoken to him, or to another. Not knowing what had been said . . . then, only then, he felt like a man in a world of fourth dimensions, surrounded by an oral world which he could not know.

A head rose up above the dim window pane which he was watching. It was in the room with him, on this side of the window. It was moving away from him, toward the window. A broad, flat-topped head with jug ears. Someone was creeping toward the window at a crouch, or on hands and knees.

A foot or a yard away from the dingy pane it paused. It was spying out at the lighted windows of the apartment across. The top of its flat head seemed to ripple and slide. Its jug ears twitched.

It put its thumbs to its ears, wagging its fingers. The darkness, vibrated with a voice again—perhaps with laughter.

Kerry Ott pushed himself up on an elbow.

"Will you," he said in his clear, deliberate, rather high-pitched voice, "kindly get the hell out of here?"

The head vanished. He arose in his dark corner, stumbling and still groggy, reaching out an arm. He felt something rushing towards him. A touch of hair, of cloth, of sweating human face with a large moist mouth, was min-

gled with his blind palm. Teeth sank into his hand, and he jerked it back. A blow from behind him, from someone else, punched him in the kidneys, hard.

He surged with a formless bellow, groping with both arms. The edge of his room door, standing open, banged into him as he made towards it. He went into the long railroad hall, following the vibration of fleeing feet, the smell of terror, towards the front door of the long flat. Ahead of him the door was jerked open, and two-jug-eared figures darted out into the dim-lit hall beyond like bats.

He surged to the door. Fleeing towards the cracked plaster corner of the stairs, headlong and frantically, were a couple of half-grown jug-eared boys, in loud sport coats and baggy pants, with red hair and freckled necks.

"Woouoo!" He sent a bloodhound howl after them.

Sheer heedless panic had hold of them—for a few moments more, flight by flight, the ancient building seemed to vibrate to their headlong frantic descent. They must have reached the front door then, and out into the night.

Kerry Ott had halted at the doorway of his flat. He couldn't catch them, and if he could, he didn't think they would be good to eat. He put his palms upon his naked chest and rubbed his pectoral muscles meditatively, with a grim mouth.

He glanced down towards the end of the corridor, where there was a ladder going up to a trapdoor to the roof. The trapdoor was open—he had thought so. They had probably been that pair of heat-standing, nose-thumbing, jitterbugging shadows which he had watched on the side wall across the alley, when he had been looking out a little after midnight, just above the dim shadow line cast by the roof parapet of Argyll Hall, beneath the shadow of the long clothesline which was stretched above. Tossing a beanbag back and forth, and all of that. Though maybe it hadn't been a beanbag they had been tossing, but a dead cat.

Funny—but not too damned funny. Unpleasant little helions. Probably spying from his window on someone they knew in the apartment across, just for the hell of it. Peeping toms, and junior members of the thugs' union in good standing. That had been a vicious bite on the hand that one of them had given him. A filthy punch in the kidneys,

## *The Hanging Rope*

the other. He could still feel it.

They had probably used the flat at other times, he thought. They had seemed to know their way around. He remembered a bunch of trashy pictures and a couple of empty whisky pints which he had found in the kitchen when he took the place. There wasn't any lock on the door. Anyone could come in.

That pair would be telling each other about the moaning ghost in the haunted flat on the top floor of Argyll Hall for a long time to come, he had the feeling. They wouldn't be back again. Still he didn't like to be disturbed. He had better get a bolt for the door tomorrow, if he wasn't finished with his play and out by then.

He fumbled with the latch mechanism before closing the door, to see if there was any way to make it catch. He noticed something flat and black lying on the worn dirty floor of the railroad hall back of him, about five feet in from the door. He stepped towards it and picked it up, examining it in the light from the hall. It was a man's black morocco purse, with gold corners, which didn't belong to him, and which he had never seen before.

It was stamped, "P. O. B." There was no money in it, but there was a draft identification, a driving license, and various cards: "Paul O. Bean, Bean, Halsey, Pardee & Bean, Counselors at Law, 50 Exchange Place"—"Mr. Paul Ormond Bean, Six Hundred Ninety-nine Park Avenue." He stuck it in the hip pocket of his pants. He would phone Mr. Bean tomorrow that he had found his purse in his flat. Or perhaps just mail it to him.

He closed the rickety front door, having found no way to secure the latch. In his sock feet he felt his way back down the long black railroad corridor towards his room. He had reached the doorway of it before he became conscious of that faint catty and meaty odor again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Cat Man

HE HAD NOTICED when he awoke a vague catty smell somewhere in the darkness and the odor of shag tobacco. He didn't smoke himself. He was sensitive to it. With his

senses of smell and touch and sight which had always to be a little keener and more keyed up because of the silence in which he dwelt.

He paused in the doorway. Against the dingy pane across the room he saw the silhouette of a small grey figure stepping down to the floor with cat lightness. Still outlined against the window it came vaguely towards him. There was some gesture it was making—of pulling off gloves, he thought.

He had an idea that he was being seen, though he could not see more than that vague approaching outline. The air stirred a moment as a voice purred at him. Or was it his imagination? Very small and soft.

"I'm deaf," he said. "I can't talk in the dark. If you'll just stay where you are, I'll find a light."

He advanced. The vague figure stepped aside, became invisible—no longer outlined against the dingy window. Just for an instant he had a feel of silk.

He reached his writing table beside the window, feeling the crumpled balls of paper crunch beneath his shoeless feet. He found the hanging bulb and turned it on. Looking over his shoulder mildly, he pulled down the window shade.

"What did you say?" he said.

A small grey man in stiff black straw hat and grey silky clerical attire stood apologetically in the centre of the room. His shoulders were hunched. There was something bulging in one of his pockets, which sagged his thin coat down. Delicately and carefully he continued pulling off his grey silk gloves, and stuffed them towards his other pocket. The gloves were rather soiled; Kerry saw a reddish stain at their fingertips, and a few small particles of some reddish stuff adhering to them, like flesh. Like hamburger. The little meek grey man's hands, however, were very white and clean.

"I am sorry, sir," his lips moved vaguely. "I didn't know anyone was in the flat."

Kerry looked at his writing table with a mild frown. The little man had stepped down from it, he thought. There was a piece of crumpled wax paper on it, with some of those same tiny pieces of red meat. The top page of his script had a wrinkled and torn look, as if it had been stood or sat on. These signs of disturbance of his sacred

desk were distinctly annoying. However, in face of the little man's vague look and soft humility, he forbore.

"I heard her crying, and came in," said the little man in vague apology. "I looked for her in the front room, but she wasn't there. It was all quite dusty and empty, sir. I didn't realize that anyone had moved in. Someone came out of the rooms down the hall, and turned on a light and went back to the kitchen, and ran water, and then came back again. Perhaps it was you, sir? I called out if they had seen a grey cat, but they did not reply.

"I came out of the front room and down the hall. I heard her then. She was playing with the papers in here on the floor. I could hear her rustling them I knocked, sir, but there was no answer. I came in, and asked you if you minded. You were lying on your cot and didn't answer. I didn't realize that you were deaf—I thought you were asleep. I don't see very well in the dark, unfortunately. Not half so well as they do, it seems. I found her playing underneath the table, and picked her up. Then those boys came bursting in, and I got up on the table with her out of their way, crouching back against the wall. I was really quite badly frightened. They are quite bad boys, really, Oscar and Willie. They do cruel things to cats. But they didn't see us, happily—most people, it seems, have extraordinarily blind eyes. I was quite relieved when you chased them away, sir. They would certainly have killed her if they found her. Isn't she a lovely thing?"

He had pulled forth a bundle of grey fur from his sagging pocket—a grey half-grown kitten, with three white feet.

Its pink tongue yawned. Its belly was full and fat. He held it in the crook of his arm, while he fumbled for tobacco pouch and pipe, which he filled with a small delicate finger.

"I always carry a packet of meat for them," he said in soft apology, striking a match on his thumbnail and lighting his pipe with little puffs. "It's horrid stuff, and I can't stand the feel of it, but they love it. My name is Finley, by the way—Father Finley, or did I introduce myself? I live across the hall. I have quite a little family at present—she makes twenty-three. Of course I don't keep them very long. When I have found a loving home, I give them away. Some day I hope you will drop in and visit us. Turn

about's fair play."

"That is kind of you," said Kerry courteously, ushering the little silky grey man towards the door.

He went with Father Finley to the front door of the flat, and ushered him on out. Smoking his pipe, with his cat cradled in his arm, the little man wandered vaguely cater-corner down the hall. Kerry fiddled with the broken lock another futile moment, then closed the door once more.

Back in his room, he saw one of the grey bloodstained gloves lying on the floor. The meek little man must have dropped it when he was stuffing them away. Kerry picked it up by the cuff edge, and deposited it in his bureau's empty bottom drawer. He dropped Mr. Paul Bean's purse in with it. He would return both items to their respective owners perhaps tomorrow, if the little grey man didn't come back for his glove before.

There was no likelihood that Mr. Bean knew where his purse was, of course, or would come for it.

HE WAS THOROUGHLY awake, now, and keyed up. The last act of his play, on which he was stalled, was organizing itself in his mind. He sat down, crumpling the waxed hamburger paper and throwing it to the floor. In his large firm and round black handwriting he began to write the last act.

Men and women moved before his eyes. He saw their entrances and their exits on a stage. He heard them speak. He heard even their most secret thoughts go round, behind the masks or grief or smug cold virtue on their faces . . . He was launched again in that timeless and speechless world of the imagination where no wall is impenetrable and no clock ticks, that free and unlimited world where everything is possible, because nothing ever was.

So it was, rapt in that immeasurable and unimmurable world, he was not aware of the men who entered.

ENTER (he wrote) THE MAN-HUNTERS, WITH STERN BLOODHOUND FACES

1st Manhunter: I thought the place was empty.

2nd Manhunter: Well, there's nothing invisible about this bird, anyway.

1st Manhunter: . . .

He was not aware of anyone standing just behind him, speaking to him. He didn't hear the good-humored, slightly bewildered voice. He didn't see the slightly baffled face. He was out of this world and out of all reality.

He wouldn't know till the hands fell on him.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe shook his head. "Excuse me, brother," he said. "That must be damned interesting tripe, whatever you are writing. But there just happen to have been a couple of small murders committed across the alleyway from you within the past hour or less, and the killer just happens to have escaped through your room here. We'd like to have you tell us if you saw him."

The big half-naked man with the bland mild face sitting at the rickety old table in the dingy room here across the alley, beside the window whose shade had been pulled down, wrote on. Tuxedo Johnny looked with a helpless belly laugh towards Detectives Jorgensen and Cark behind him.

"Out of this world," he said. "Anybody could have crawled right over him, and he wouldn't have known it. Maybe they did. Hey, brother! Wake up! It's murder!"

It was, Tuxedo Johnny was sure, the right room. He had come on into the empty rear flat with Cark and Jorgensen to locate the escape room and look it over, while Big Bat had delayed a moment, turning back to give a last look into Father Finley's cat-filled front flat across the hall.

It had been an extraordinary break of luck, finding Finley vaguely wandering, grey and small and silky, with a grey cat on his arm, smoking his shaggy pipe, in the dim, moldy hall. His place of residence hadn't been traced yet, and it would have been some time tomorrow at the least, and maybe several days, before the little unobtrusive man would otherwise have been located.

He hadn't known where he had been during the last hour, or all evening, when they asked him. Perhaps he hadn't known where he had been for the past several years.

He had left Dan's apartment at one or two o'clock, he thought. But it wasn't quite one o'clock yet. He had thought, then, that he might have left at nine or ten. But actually it had been a quarter of twelve, just eighteen minutes before Dan's murder and thirty minutes before



Kitty's, when he had taken the elevator down, according to Boaz, the elevator man, who was sweating to tell the truth.

He didn't know where he had been in the meantime. He had been looking for a cat—a half-grown cat, or rather a kitten, grey, with three white feet. And here he was, smoking his pipe, with the grey kitten with the white feet, that he had found at last, in his arm.

*Isn't she lovely, Bat?*

Behind a door, near where they had found him, there had been the inaudible silky rustling of his innumerable cats, throatily, inaudibly thrumming, walking around in slow cat-patterns on padded feet. This was where he lived now, therefore. Here on the fourth floor of the old tenement across the alley from Dan McCue's. This was where he had probably been living for the past month, since he had unobtrusively left Hell's Kitchen. Laying what plans, making what cunning catlike stalks preliminary to murder, God knew.

*Dan's dead, Michael.*

*Oh, dear, I do hope he remembered to leave me his money for my cat foundation. Paul Bean promised to see to it that I should have some of it. But I really could use it all. One doesn't realize how many hungry cats the world is filled with . . .*

*Dan was murdered, Michael. In his apartment. He was beaten to death with a bottle and a poker, by some friend of his, who came to visit him.*

*Oh, dear, oh goodness me! How bloody, how cruel, some men can be . . .*

*Kitty Weisenkranz, her that was little Kitty Kane of Jerome Street, that was the daughter of Bill Kane the bricklayer and Kitty Shawn of Shannon, was murdered, too, Michael. Wild and beautiful little black-eyed Kitty. Remember how when you were younger and were clerking in the bookstore, living with your wife and kid, before they were burned up in the fire and you went kind of off, you used to tirade against her, Michael! Saying she was sinful, full of sin, and would be better off dead. You were younger and hotter then, of course, Michael, against the sins of the flesh. But she had her throat cut with a razor, Michael.*

### *The Hanging Rope*

*Dan's razor was a little dull tonight. He never strops them. I like a razor with a good clean stroke. My skin is very tender. But he always has plenty of hot water . . .*

*Yes, the water is hot, Michael. Wouldn't you like to go along down with one of the boys? Perhaps you had better go along, and collect your thoughts a little, Michael. Perhaps there will be something you can remember.*

*I remember I heard the crying beyond the door. I put on my gloves, and went in. I think she was afraid of me and trying to hide from me. But I knew she was there. Then I found her.*

He's got a glove, just one, in his pocket, boys. May have dropped the other in the vacant room, or in the alley. If we find it, that will clinch it. Take him along, Fulheimer. Just tell the boys to go easy with him. Nothing rough. He wouldn't know what they were doing to him, anyway . . .

So they had found Father Finley, by a lucky break, wandering in the hall here on the top floor of the old tenement across the alleyway from Dan's. And Big Bat had paused, after the little grey man had been taken unprotestingly away, to look for a moment into that front flat of his, filled with pad-footed, silkily weaving, lambent-eyed cats, to see if the ladder or the board he had used was there, while Tuxedo Johnny Blythe and Jorgensen and Cark had gone on to look for the glove, or anything else, into the old empty flat without a lock in the rear, which faced Dan's, and which must have been the way he came through.

"IT'S MURDER, brother!" said Tuxedo Johnny good-humoredly, though baffled. "The boys think they've probably got the man, but there's just a chance it might have been the other one. He got away through your window here, anyway, whichever one he was. All we wanted to know was just whether you happened to see him . . . My God!" he said, with a helpless quiver of his belly muscles. "Clear out of this world! I wonder how they do it?"

The two detectives laughed with him as the big unconscious man laid a page aside and wrote on.

Big Bat O'Brien came down the hall.

"Boards!" he said, with his quick eyes darting to the baseboard just inside the door. "A pile of painter's planks! And he needed only one! That's what I wanted! Have you

found his other glove here? . . . Who's that bird?" he shot, advancing. "Does he live in this dump? Was he in here? Did he see him? Why, for the holy love of the whispering son of Brian of Carney!" he said in a whisper, on tiptoe. "It's Mr. Ott!"

"Do you know him, Bat?" Tuxedo Johnny said with a bewildered chuckle. "Does he think? Does he breathe? Is he human? I thought maybe he was the original mechanical man. So help me, I've told him five times that it was murder, and five times that the guy escaped right through his room here, and five times I've asked him pointblank if he saw him. And he just sits here writing. He's out of this world. He's nowhere. Anybody could have come in and walked right over him."

"He's Kerry Ott, the playwright," said Big Bat in a whisper, tiptoeing. "He doesn't know anything you're saying unless he's looking at you, Johnny. He's deaf as the grave. There's only one thing that makes him mad, and that's to be disturbed while he's writing, too. He may have been out or asleep when the killer came through, of course, and not seen him at all, or be able to tell us anything about him. But if he saw him well enough to identify him, and it *wasn't* poor Michael Finley, I'd like to know it, and quick. We've got poor Michael where he can't do any more harm, and for as long as we want him. But Paul Bean's a lawyer, and we can't hold him three hours unless we've got some proof. And if we let the wrong man loose, he's just too smart, and he's liable to kill again on us. I don't know what to do."

"I was just thinking of giving him the hotfoot, to see if he could feel it without his shoes," said Tuxedo Johnny Blythe good humouredly. "I'd have liked to see his face. But if he's a friend of yours, Bat, we'll do it the soft way."

"Johnny, you'd better not—"

But Tuxedo Johnny Blythe had already put his smooth plump good-natured, chuckling hands on the sides of the big concentrated man's face from behind, with a slight, soothing barber's stroke.

"Wake up out of your dreamland, brother! It's murder!"

Kerry Ott turned his bland mild face around, pushing up his knees, in bland glaring rage. He stood up, knocking his chair backwards, filled with glaring thoughts of mur-

der. He snapped his pencil in two and squeezed the pieces in his fists.

"Who did that?" he said. "Damn him, who did that? That broke it! Who are you with your slick polished hands and the dumb fat grin like a bewildered nine-months-old baby examining a feather?"

"What do you mean by coming in here and rubbing me?" he went on in his high outraged voice. "Haven't you got brains enough to leave me alone while I'm working on a play? If you think that writing one is simple work, trying to make something impossible seem possible, and something seem real that never happened; just try and do it some time! Damn it, that broke it! That broke it all apart!"

He exhaled an outraged breath.

"What are you doing in here, Arthur?" he said to Big Bat O'Brien, glaring. "Who is this dumb friend of yours with the baffled look? Who is responsible for this insufferable intrusion?"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Cobweb

OH, IT WAS TERRIBLE!

Wrenched out of that timeless and spaceless imaginary world, where he had been ranging, back into this small limited world of obviousness and reality, by a stroke of offensive familiarity. Light and smooth as the touch of a beetle's wing, perhaps, but he was sensitive to touch, and had an antipathy to being handled. He would almost sooner have been hit with a hammer. Damn the fool!

Emerald-eyed, red-haired, bald-pated Big Bat O'Brien of homicide—whom nobody else in God's world had ever called or even thought of as Arthur, even his mother having called him Bat—from whom Kerry had got at times an idea for a play or two, and to whom perhaps he had given an idea, was in here, with a couple of his prize bloodhounds, it looked like, and this fourth bird, who had given him that startling brush of hands. Just as his play was finishing. They broke it.

He took another breath, calming down. The man who

had done it looked completely baffled, startled, hurt, and anguished to the death.

"All right!" Kerry said, leaning back against the table. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I don't like to hurt men. Let's leave it there . . . What is it, Arthur? Spill it, and get it over."

He leaned back against his table, with his bland mild face, watching the movement of Big Bat O'Brien's lips, a little sick. Oh, it was terrible! Terrible . . .

Big Bat O'Brien had clenched his teeth in his cigar.

"Mr. Ott," he said, "the light was out and the shade was up in this room a little while ago, when we looked across. It had the appearance of being an empty room. But it's your room, I take it. Could you just tell me whether you have been here since fourteen and a half minutes after midnight, and if you saw a man, who was either a little unobtrusive grey cat man, or a thin, tall beanpole man, coming in through your window from the small bathroom window in the building across the alley, on one of those painters' boards which are stacked up along that base-board and making his escape out through your door?"

"What is it, Arthur—the It-pays-to-be-an-idiot program? If so, I bite."

Make a joke out of it, he might. But it was terrible, really.

Big Bat O'Brien had clenched his teeth more firmly into his cigar. Standing wide planted on his light and nimble feet, rocking his stomach quietly. Looking at Kerry Ott, the playwright, who knew a scene when he saw one, or a play when it had been described to him, with his hard emerald eyes.

"Mr. Ott," he said, "a man and a woman—Mr. Dan McCue, the eminent philanthropist and political leader, and Mrs. Kitty Weisenkranz, a friend of his, who lived across the hall from him—were murdered in his apartment in the Royal Arms, directly facing you across the alley, during the quarter hour after midnight. The front door was chained and the rear window was locked when the place was broken into, and there were bars on all the other windows. There was only one way the killer could have escaped, and that was out the little bathroom window and through this room, by crossing the intervening space on a ladder or board. Shake hands with Johnny

### *The Hanging Rope*

Blythe of the Federal Aid Bureau, who's just up from Washington, who used to be Dan's right hand man for fifteen years, and who is one of the most popular and best-liked guys you ever met. Johnny used to be a cop himself. If he had stayed, he might have made a good one. The boys just inside the door are Detective-sergeants Cark and Jorgensen of homicide, two of the smartest men in the department, who are agreed with Johnny and me that the killer could have escaped in no other way than this.

"Dan was killed in his library at three minutes after midnight with a champagne bottle that Paul Bean had brought to him, and a poker that was there. Kitty was killed at fourteen and a half minutes after midnight with a razor that Michael Finley had used to shave himself with a half hour before—he had dropped in before, off and on, to do it, using Dan's hot water, and had done it tonight, as he mentioned to the elevator man. So both Bean and Finley had prints on one of the murder weapons, but whichever killed him later wore gloves.

"We just picked up Michael Finley, and he had no explanation or alibi at all for his whereabouts during the murder time. We found one bloodstained glove on him. He lost the other somewhere. If he had lost it in your room here, we would know we had him. However, since apparently he didn't, there is an element of doubt about him, which leaves Paul Bean still in it.

"Paul Bean was picked up about half an hour ago, fifteen minutes after the murders were completed, on the street about a block away from the Royal Arms, dressed in a pair of dark slacks and an old dark golf pullover, and with his fingers wrapped in bandages, looking for a purse he had lost when some boys tripped him up, after he left Dan, earlier in the evening. Or that's his story. But if we had found his purse lying on the floor in this room, it would have been the clinching thing against him, like the glove against Michael Finley. Or if you saw one of them close enough to identify him, that would close it. You get the picture, Mr. Ott?"

OH, IT WAS TERRIBLE, really. It would have been a terrible play.

"Motive, Arthur?" said Kerry tiredly. "There must be some motive."

"Both men had a motive, a money motive," said Big Bat O'Brien, "for killing Dan. Kitty Kane, it looks like, was just in his way as he escaped. But Finley thought—and still thinks, it seems—that Dan was going to leave him a big chunk of money in his will, if not all of it. He's laying plans to feed ten million cats. Dan hadn't made a will though, as Bean knew. And without a will Bean's thirteen-year-old stepdaughter, Dan's granddaughter, will inherit everything—little Jennie Blythe. She was Johnny's daughter here, but Sue McCue Renoed him a dozen years ago, and married Bean. Which means Bean would have control of the money for eight years till she comes of age. And that is all the time a lawyer needs to have his hands on money."

A terrible play, still.

"Time, Arthur?" said Kerry tiredly. "How do you know the time so precisely of the murders?"

"Fifty people heard Kitty scream," said Big Bat O'Brien. "Some police were already downstairs in the building—Johnny here had them called. The time was fourteen minutes after midnight, or fifteen. The phone operator clocked the time of Dan's murder. He had tried to call for help as he was being killed— at twelve-o-three."

"My God," said Kerry Ott. It was even more terrible than he had thought.

"Scene?" he said, staring incredulously at Big Bat O'Brien's hard bright emerald eyes. "Chained door and locked windows? Who discovered the murders, Arthur?"

Big Bat told him about that, too. About how Johnny had come rushing down the stairs, with the front door of the Royal Arms the only way he could think of for a murderer to get away, but watching for anybody he might see on the way, too. Without realizing, till he met that phony cop, Slipsky, and the elevator man had come down to join them and had offered to get into Dan's apartment with the pass-key that he had, that with a chain on the door no murderer could have got away out in front, and that if there hadn't been a chain he could have got into Dan's himself with his own key.

Big Bat wore a brief grin, while Cark and Jorgensen joined in a laugh again at poor Tuxedo Johnny. Big Bat told about how Johnny had then gone around to break in the back, taking Slipsky with him, and had met Rasmus-

sen, the janitor, and heard about the devil himself. And how Johnny and Slipsky had gone on up and broken in the locked window and found Dan's body; and how Johnny had told Slipsky to phone homicide while he went on to see if the chain was still on the front door, which he didn't expect to find, it having now occurred to him that it was probably off and should be off, as that was the way the killer had probably got away. And how Slipsky hadn't phoned, but had followed him out. And how Slipsky and he had both seen that the chain was still on the door, which meant that somebody was still in the apartment. And how then they had heard Kitty scream, and Johnny had gone rushing in.

"Johnny thinks it may have been only a few seconds before he went in," said Big Bat O'Brien glibly. "But he may have just stopped to tie his shoelace, or figure up his insurance policies. I know I would, myself, without a gun. There she was, anyway. She must have died within a second. However long it was, it gave him time, with the fuse that blew, to make his getaway somehow. By the bathroom window, as we found out, and across here. It was the only way."

Great God, it was incredible! Kerry Ott turned his bland mild face on the pink-cheeked man with the round blue eyes, with the look of a fat nine-months-old infant examining a feather.

"My God!" he said.

"It may have been more time than I thought before I found her," the dumb-faced man's lips moved to him, with a swallowing of his Adam's apple. "A man gets mixed up at a time like that. Maybe it was as long as forty or fifty seconds. I was just trying to gauge the probabilities. She was dead, anyway. He got out that bathroom window, that's all. He came through your room, that's all. He got away."

His fat dumb eyes were on that drawn window shade, before that dingy window, straining.

"Oh, impossible!" said Kerry tiredly.

"Impossible?" said Big Bat O'Brien.

"The hell it was impossible!" said Tuxedo Johnny Blythe. "What does this bird know about it, Bat? Anyone could have come in here and walked right over him."



He strode to the window shade and ripped it off. He said something with his back turned, but Kerry didn't see.

"The spider web," said Kerry wearily. "Not any slipshod haphazard web thrown up helter-skelter in fifteen minutes by a theridiid, but the patient work of an argiopid—octagonal, geometric, flawless, with four rays of laddered silk. A work of time. A work of highest art. Moored from the window ledge across the pane, to every corner. That web wasn't spun since twelve-fourteen. She has been spinning that web all night."

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe tore the geometric net of thin and sticky threads to tatters with one sweep of his arm. He smashed the black and yellow spider as it ran, with one blow of his fist. He gave the window a violent tug. But it didn't budge. His shoulders heaved. There was sweat on his smooth-shaved neck. Big Bat O'Brien went over and helped him. They both heaved.

Big Bat O'Brien turned his puzzled face around.

"Nailed," he said. "In solid, and there's paint and dust on the heads. They've been in years. What's the answer, Mr. Ott?"

Kerry Ott's mild face looked tired. The obviousness of reality. The walls which no one could have gone through. The one actor on the scene. But he was not one to smash even a spider, which had not harmed him. He was not God, or even a policeman.

"Perhaps you had better go back to your fingerprints, Arthur," was all he said.

He watched them going out the door, before he sat down to work again. Big Bat had his big red-haired paw on the shoulder of that dumb-eyed man, with his look of a nine-months-old infant examining a feather. And Kerry thought that Big Bat had understood . . .

## CHAPTER NINE

### Killer

THAT KERRY OTT, the big deaf maker of plays, had any idea that his death was near him, even in the most submerged recesses of his mind, seems unlikely.

### *The Hanging Rope*

There he was, a man who was always sure that he knew the way men's minds work, and the probability of their actions in a given situation. He knew that Big Bat O'Brien was intelligent, strong, and relentless. He knew the killer looked dumb and had acted dumb.

It seemed to him that he was finished with it. It had been just a bad play, a terrible play, conceived and acted out in a hysterical, addlebrained, confusedly ad-libbing way by a fatheaded murderer. That was the terrible thing about it. An actor must have entered a stage somehow before he can exit from it, in any play. But there that brainless fat-headed goon had been seen by an audience exiting at a wild hysterical rush from a stage, without an explanation of how he had ever got onto it.

Rushing down the stairs from Dan McCue's door. That had been his first appearance on the scene—getting off it. No one had asked him when he had gone up to Dan McCue's door, or how else he had got there, except by going up the stairs, and he had not explained, since there would have been no explanation. Slipsky had been in the lobby for at least fifteen minutes, and the elevator man, too, and would have seen him coming in, if he had come in that way. He hadn't been a man who had come in. He had been a man who had been leaving, by the nearest and quickest way that he could think of, with that yellow light and red pipe glow which he had seen down below the fire-escape out back. Maybe he hadn't thought of the need of explaining how he had come in, with his need to explain how he must have got away. And nobody had asked him.

It made a play, Kerry thought, beginning, "Exit, murderer." Like Alice through the looking-glass, where everyone runs backwards. A very bad play indeed. If the guy hadn't been such a dumbbell, someone would have asked him just where he came in, and he would have never got away as far as he had. Which had been only as far as here, to a spider's web and a nailed window across the alley, seeking a way out.

The one bright thing he had done, apparently, had been to rush up to the fifth and ring the elevator bell, before rushing down. But even a moron has one brain cell. He had hidden on a landing of the stairs, behind the elevator operator's back, as the cage arose. Except for Slipsky, he

would probably have gotten away unseen. It must have been a dreadful moment for him when he saw that form in blue watching for him quietly behind the pillar in the lobby.

A dreadful moment, in a different way, when he learned that Slipsky hadn't been a real cop, and that he might have made him and Boaz the goats for Dan McCue's murder, if he had only played it a little differently.

A ham actor, who had done a terrible play. It had been awful to watch Big Bat O'Brien's lips reciting the crudities of it, and project it before his eyes. But it was finished. Big Bat was keen and intelligent, and certainly must have got it. He had had his hand on that feather-eyed killer's shoulder when they went out.

Only Kerry failed to take into calculation the strength of an established idea. The idea that a tuxedo cop could be anything more than comical in any connection with police work would never occur to Big Bat O'Brien. Particularly Tuxedo Johnny. He was just a laugh. Unless Big Bat had seen those vicious murders being done before his eyes by that pink-faced man with the bewildered eyes, it would quite likely have been impossible for him to believe that Tuxedo Johnny could do them. Even if he had seen them, he might have regarded them as an optical illusion, and gone down to see the eye-man, rubbing his pupils.

"I don't get it, Johnny," Big Bat had said, with his big, red-haired paw on Tuxedo Johnny's shoulder as they went out the door of the little room and down the long railroad hall. "Ott is usually smart in seeing things in a scene that you describe to him. Where this actor is, and where that. He says a playwright has to be. He calls it constructive imagination. He seemed to hint that I was something of a boob for not seeing for myself. But, by God, as I can see it, it leaves nowhere for him to have got away to at all when the boys came in at front and back, not more than two minutes at the most after Kitty had screamed. That must mean that he—was right."

"Rasmussen!" said Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, sweating. "Rasmussen, the gnome janitor, Bat!" With the most brilliant thinking he had done all evening, and perhaps in his life. And thinking for his life.

"That's who this bird Ott, who doesn't know where he is at, meant it must have been, Bat," he said, thinking fast,

and sweating. "I can see it all plain now, dumb as I am. Rasmussen was in the apartment when I was there at the door. He unchained it and followed me down when I went rushing down the stairs. He took the lobby stairs into the basement, while I was talking to Slipsky, ran through to the back, and was out there smoking his pipe when Slipsky and I arrived. Can you imagine how smart he was?"

"After telling us that crazy story of having seen the devil on the fire escape, he followed us up the escape, got in the window just behind us, rushed across the living-room into the hall and into the bedroom before I had got the library lights turned on, and killed Kitty. Fixed the bulb, too—he'd have had time for that—it could have been longer that I thought. He had all the motive in the world, too. He thought Dan had been getting gay with his daughter. My God, why didn't I think of him before?"

"He's lame, Johnny."

"It's only a disguise. Don't let him fool you. He's probably fast as lightning. Don't let any doctor tell you any different either. A guy as smart as that can fool any doctor."

"Would he have had time, as he was rushing from the living-room into the bedroom, after you and Slipsky had entered and before you got the lights on, to have stopped and put the chain on the door again, Johnny? He had had to take it off to get out and follow you down, you know. And it would have made a jangle as he put it on which you should have heard. And so on."

"Why, Kitty put the chain on the door, Bat," said Tuxedo Johnny quietly. "Hadh't you got that figured out, Bat? She came in after old Dan had been killed, I've got it figured out, with the key she had, with those birthday roses for him. It was all dark, and she thought he had gone to bed. But she wanted to arrange the roses in water and put them in his bedroom where he could see them in the morning. She just slipped the chain on the door for the few minutes she would be in, so none of the different friends that he had given keys to might come in and wake him up while she was arranging them. She tiptoed through the bedroom into the bathroom, thinking he was sleeping in the big bed, picking up a bowl that she knew of from his chiffonier in the darkness and went into the bathroom. She arranged the roses, and maybe waited till she had finished smoking a cigarette. Then she came out,

and saw—*him*. And suddenly she knew—she knew he was a murderer, and she went hysterical, and let out that scream—”

Tuxedo Johnny swallowed.

“I’ve got it all figured out, Bat,” he said. “I got it figured out some time ago.”

As indeed he had.

“It fits,” said Big Bat slowly. “It fits. She was the one who put the chain on, after Dan was dead. The killer went out, and in again. That was one thing that was puzzling me—What he was doing in those eleven and a half or twelve minutes. But that answers it. Rasmussen was the killer. Johnny, you’d have made a cop yet, if you’d stuck to it. You aren’t so dumb.”

HE CAME UP the worn old dusty stairs of Argyll Hall soundlessly and obscurely, hugging the poor, torn wallpaper against the staircase wall. The dwellers in the dingy flats were all asleep in this black hour of morning.

There was no pan-faced elevator man in front, no gnome janitor with burning eyes in back, in Argyll Hall. People here minded their own business. They were not prying. They kept their eyes down when they moved up or down the stairs. And they were all asleep.

He saw no one. No one saw him. An obscure figure in his suit of cobweb grey, with his coat lapels turned up above his neck, with his hat brim pulled down above his eyes. He even simulated in part a drunken man’s uncertain tread. The worn wooden flights had been mounted or descended by many such vague figures in the many years they had stood here, in the old building. Perhaps by some on the same errand. His right hand was jammed in his coat pocket as he mounted softly upward, pressing against the dingy stair wall beneath the dim infrequent bulbs.

He was on the fourth floor now. He went down it, tip-toeing, past the door with silent padding cats behind it, which was the door of Michael Finley, stepping no less silently than they, towards the trapdoor ladder at the end.

He mounted up it. This time he would have another way out, just in case. As Big Bat had said, even a goon would think to have another way. There was the clothesline stretched above the parapet, which he had observed as

he stood on the first floor escape landing of the Royal Arms, waiting for Slipsky, waiting to go up and discover Dan dead, and put the chain upon the door. Not knowing that she was in there, that the chain was on already. Not knowing that to have the chain on would leave him no way out.

He had noted that rope, as he noted a great many things, with his round eyes of an infant examining a feather. As he noted, a few years ago at Nantucket, while swimming with Dan, Junior, that the boy was floundering a little, and was not a good swimmer, afraid of water. And so, the next time he had taken him out in a rowboat, in his bathing suit, a mile off shore, had asked him to lean back and fetch that painter dangling off the stern; and just accidentally with a crabbing oar had given the boy a nudge, which had knocked him out into the water—for a long time, it seemed to him, for a long, long time, the boy had followed him, floundering, gasping, sobbing, calling out to him, as he had pulled hard for shore. He had been afraid the boy would make it, and indeed, he had made it more than three-quarters home.

With his round feather-filled bewildered eyes, that noted a great many things—that had noted the tetanus culture in the laboratory of his old college-mate, the research biologist, one day last autumn when he had been on a bumbling visit. Finding the time, in his bewildered way, while Doc Joe explained it to him and he examined it, to impregnate a pin with it.

He had gone to Sue and Paul that evening, to see Jennie. The divorce of twelve years before had been friendly; they were modern people and he and Paul both worked for Dan. He had surrendered none of his rights over Jennie. The right to see her at any time. He had picked up and been fondling the cat which Finley had given Sue for Jennie, a tortoiseshell with a milk face, while he had been standing talking with Sue and Paul right in the hall. And Sue and Paul had turned their faces for a moment, as Jennie had called goodnight to them from the doorway of her bedroom. Suddenly the cat in his arms, which was brushing against Sue's arm, had scratched her, with one claw, thrusting deep.

Oh, it must have been a cat. Cats scratch. And it had been in his arms, brushing her. He wouldn't have stuck a

pin in her, would he, with his round bewildered eyes? Right before the eyes of Paul and Jennie. So it was just the deep dig of a cat's claw, and nothing to go to the doctor for. And tetanus serum must be used quickly.

A drowned boy washed up on the beach, with water-filled lungs and a burst heart, but with his face quiet and at peace—calmed by death, calmed by the sea, after all his agony. A woman, placid, middle-aged, who had loved him once, though wisely not for long, who had died of tetanus—not a pleasant way to die. The doctors and nurses hadn't liked to talk of it—too tragically preventable. But that look of last agony had been wiped out on her face, too, by death, or by the undertaker's art.

Two quiet murders, when the opportunity had been presented. But never red bloody murder before tonight. It was his first contact with it. He didn't like it. It had been the only way to get old Dan, though. You couldn't drown him. You couldn't scratch him. He was too tough and strong. From behind, with all strength and fury, that had been the only way to do it to old Dan. Any one of those blows should have killed him, but still he had reached his phone. He had been tough, it had been bad. Bad old Dan.

The blood that he had got upon his hands, without knowing it till he was outside the door! He must have left prints of it on the doorknob, he had realized, and perhaps on the door frame. A huge and flooding tide pouring down the stairs after him as he fled. But there couldn't have been much blood on the door knob. Kitty couldn't have noticed it. The precinct men who had come in hadn't seen any. They had just laid it down to his imagination—poor dumb bewildered Johnny.

He had washed the blood off his hands with soap and water in the bathroom, swiftly, when Slipsky had fled, stepping in the darkness over that dead form lying on the bathroom threshold, with her dead staring eyes. Had she fainted when she collapsed in terror, with that scream at sight of him, and had her head struck the hard tiled floor, and she known nothing more? Or had she been awake, and knowing him, when he had reached her in three seconds, swift, swift as a leaping tiger in the darkness, falling on a knee beside her and stifling any second scream that might come from her warm soft throat, reaching up with his other hand to old Dan's bathroom shelf?

### *The Hanging Rope*

Whether she had known him, or not known him, in that last swift dreadful second, he would never know, with her black eyes upon him. But she had known that he had murder in him long ago. A woman knows that about the man she loves.

Terror at the sight of him with his bloody hand, at old Dan's door, as she came out of the bathroom! Sheer terror, and she had screamed, collapsing. And he had been in there with her, swift, swift as a tiger, in three seconds more. The tiger on the bound moves swift and straight. The paralyzed doe awaits its death.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe, with his bewildered eyes which saw so much. With the well-kept, well-fed, gymnasium-conditioned muscles beneath his plump pink hide . . .

On the roof of the old tenement he cut the clothesline stretched above the parapet which he had seen. It was good, new stuff—he ran it swiftly through his slick fingertips—with a tensile strength of all of three hundred pounds. He bent one end of it with a bosun's knot around an iron stanchion set in the brick parapet, just opposite that little frosted bathroom window of old Dan's, and let the end drop down into the alley, past the window of the playwright straight below.

It was another way out, if necessary, if the stairs down should be blocked. He estimated that the chances were not one in a thousand that he would not be able to get out of the building, down the stairs and clear away before the bang of a shot in the upstairs of the old tenement would rouse anyone. Still it was better, as he had found, to have a way out. Always one possible way.

He had paid the rope out. It reached down to the alley, or near it. The shade had been replaced at the window below again. The man inside could not see it.

Tuxedo Johnny Blythe went down the ladder again from the roof. He went quietly along the hall to that rear flat, and through the door that had no lock. He went down the long black railroad hall, to the door of the room halfway in back.

He listened without a breath. He heard the rustle of a sheet of paper being crumpled and thrown to the floor. He heard the brief momentary sharpening of a pencil—*snick-snick-snick*. He heard the creak of chair legs as the man in there shifted position slightly. He heard the smallest



sounds—to the pounding of his own heart. The man in there could hear no sound. He would never know what had hit him.

Gripping the gun in his pocket Tuxedo Johnny opened the door.

He watched carefully.

The big man sat at his table across the room, beside the shaded window, beneath the bright bulb hanging from the ceiling, writing and writing on. He was out of this world. He was nowhere. A man could walk right up behind his shoulder, and he would not know it.

Still with a soft quiet step Tuxedo Johnny put a foot across the threshold. The big deaf man with the bland mild face made a sudden gesture as if to push his chair back, or turn around.

From the threshold the killer fired straightway . . .

"CURTAIN," Kerry Ott had written, jabbing his pencil down.

Putting a period to the play. The thing was finished. He eased his shoulders back with a relaxing gesture. It was a movement purely involuntary and reflexive, which contained in it the split second, the inch of life, for the man who had fired that gun had a steady hand and eye. Diagonally beside him the wall spouted plaster dust from a hole suddenly bored there. In the silence in which he dwelt.

He was not quite the bland sophisticated type that he aspired to be, nor even completely the inspired man-of-letters type which he appeared to be; and no doubt there would always be many subtle civilized situations where his large and somewhat ungainly presence would be at a loss. But he had a more primitive type of awareness than a bland sophisticated man or an inspired literary man may be supposed to possess. For he had come from the Ozarks, from a feud country, and he knew what bark means when it flies from a tree or plaster from a wall.

His reaction was something more than instantaneous, hurling his body to one side, gripping the back of the chair behind him and swinging it above. He hit the floor and rolled as the light above him went out in a shower of shattered bulb glass, struck by the chair legs, with the wood in his grip splitting to the blast of the second shot.

### *The Hanging Rope*

He saw the flash of the third shot in the blackness as the killer came rushing at him, firing. He was no longer the maker of plays, out of this world, in spaces unwalled and timeless. He was in this little room, in quick and black reality. He had respect for a gun—in the hand of a mad-man all the more.

*He killed O'Brien!* the thought flashed to him. *No! O'Brien didn't get it! No one knows. If he kills me, he's safe!*

There was only the blackness, and the thudding rush of the killer's feet towards him. The vibrancy of a voice, with oaths or threats or triumph that he could not hear. He was on hands and knees. He hurled himself in a blind silent tackle, as a flash streaked at him again and his right arm went numb with the anodyne of shock which blots out pain.

He missed at first. But he caught hold of the killer's gun wrist in the next moment. With his left hand, in silence. A flash went upward. A hand was at his throat, choking. He could not feel his right arm. He butted with his head and broke that grip. They struggled over the floor. He felt fist blows rain against his face. He held that gun wrist, he struck with his head again, in silence.

He was strong, this dumb-faced man, with his round eyes dim in the darkness for the moment, six inches from Kerry's own. Two hundred pounds of him, and full of murder, fighting now for his own life. Kerry had his thumb jammed beneath the gun hammer, but he could not hold that wrist. His sprawling feet stumbled. The hammer of the gun almost tore his thumbnail off as it was ripped from him. The killer was out of contact with him again.

In the silent blackness. Perhaps it was filled with oaths of gibbering, he wouldn't know. Shoeless, he had leaped aside, in silence. The killer had no more shots to waste. He was waiting to locate the target now. Kerry felt a piece of wood, a leg or rung of the shattered chair, he thought, touching his foot. He rolled it lightly, leaping aside.

Sound! In the world of silence where he lived there was no sound. He did not know what it was to have it or to miss it. But to men who lived in a world of sound, there is a dreadfulness about a silent struggle in a black place, and their nerves may be betrayed by a small rolling

sound. Kerry did not hear it, but the killer did. His gun blazed at it. In panic again.

The last shot in that gun, he knew. And the killer knew that he knew. Kerry felt the floor thud with the rush of feet. Rushing for the unseen door.

He reached it first. He stood backed to it. He took a silent breath.

"You won't get out!" he said in his clear and careful voice. I'm going to murder you right now! You asked for it."

It was the first word that he had uttered. The first sound, except for the rolling of that chair rung, which he had made. But he had got his breath now, and that murderous gun was empty.

Whether the dumb-faced man answered him he did not know. Nor what terrors were in that man's mind, over the struggle in the black silence, and now the word of death. Kerry felt the sawhorse standing on the pile of planks beside the door. He planted his right foot against a leg of it, and ripped at it to pull it apart with his left hand. The two-by-four leg came off, a two-foot length, with nails at the end of it. Perhaps the ripping wood had cried and the pulled nails had screamed—he wouldn't know. But the killer knew—though perhaps not from what those sounds had come. Let him guess.

He himself was a killer now. In the darkness he advanced.

His eyes were swimming, swimming, through the darkness . . .

Suddenly, half across the room from him, the window shade was ripped from its roller. Against the dark dirty window glass he saw the silhouette of the killer then. He rushed. There was a rope hanging beyond the window. But the pane was filled with the killer's bulk and was sharding outward in a burst of glass within the instant. The killer had gone through.

He had gone at last through the dark and dingy window of that room across the alley, the only way out for him that there had been, as perhaps he had known from the beginning. The only way out at all. And he had found it now, going through the window.

Kerry Ott was two strides behind him as he went bursting out, with the glass splintering. Just for an instant Tux-

edo Johnny seemed to be floating motionless in space, with his hands reaching for the rope. Just for an instant the sharding glass was motionless around him—a flat piece of it, a foot in diameter, with ragged edges, sitting horizontal in air beside his throat. Then he had caught the rope, and one of his legs was twisted in the slack of it, and the flying shards of glass went on, to drop below. Beyond the window that he had gone through at last, Tuxedo Johnny Blythe looked at the playmaker with his bewildered eyes, like the eyes of a nine-months-old infant examining a feather. Baffled by the mystery and strangeness of it. By the mystery and strangeness of life and death.

Kerry had not seen that flat sheet of glass strike him, or him strike it. There are things much too quick to see. Quick as the stroke of a razor, it had gone across his throat, and on.

He looked at Kerry Ott with his bewildered eyes for an instant, and then his mouth opened, in what was perhaps a scream, or might have been no sound at all. The blood was coming from his throat. He put up his hands, and fell backward, with his leg caught in the bight of the rope. He had always been horrified by his own blood so. But he could not hold it in with both hands now.

For what seemed a long moment he hung head downward. Then the rope whirled and straightened, and he was gone. Kerry Ott shoved his feet into his shoes, and put his shirt around him.

He left his flat, and went down to the street. The grey false dawn at the end of the summer night was beginning to lighten in the east. The air was cold and thin.

Some men had gathered back in the alleyway already. More were going down. There had been those shots; a gun being emptied in the old tenement. There had been, perhaps, yells, and oaths which Kerry had not heard, and just as well. A milkwagon and two or three taxis had stopped beside the curb, at the alley's mouth. A patrolman was going down it at a run. Soon there would be dozens, and perhaps hundreds. But the man who had been frightened that the gnome janitor might see him, and had been paralyzed with terror when Slipsky had seen him, did not care how many might see him now. He had gone through the window at last. He had found the way

out, as he had known that he must do from the beginning.

A taxicab drew up in front of the Royal Arms as Kerry reached the alley's mouth. Big Bat O'Brien got out of it. He caught sight of Kerry and came towards him, his steps deliberate.

"I was thinking about what you said about going back to the fingerprints," he said a little gravely, with his external meaningless smile gone from his face. "None on the phone, when I knew that he had used it. But I just couldn't imagine that even Johnny could be quite dumb enough to tell me, practically out loud, what he was trying so hard to hide."

"I wonder if he was so dumb," said Kerry, "if most of us would have played it any better, or even half so well. Being caught red-handed, trying to escape, by the blue arm of the law and still trying to bull it through. At least I'd hate to have to try, myself, to do it any better. You would have come to the fingerprints sooner or later yourself, Inspector. A man can't think of everything. Even having no prints at all can be a betraying thing."

"Collodion, I suppose," Big Bat said. "There was a spot on his chin, where he had given himself a little cut. Maybe it was that that made him think of doing it. Started him off on thoughts of blood. Maybe he didn't play it so bad, when he got started."

"He played it well," said Kerry. "It was just the play that was terrible."

"So it had to come to this for Johnny, did it?" said Big Bat gravely, a little heavily, as they went down the alley.

He pushed his hat on the back of his head. He clasped his hands behind his back. His emerald eyes were dull, full of the shadow of many remembered things.

"I had just made my first grade the hard way when he was taken on as a lieutenant," he said. "He didn't know much, but he was always a nice guy. I remember the day when he married Sue McCue, a big fine healthy wholesome girl, Dan's daughter, and it looked like his world was made. The big wedding at St Christopher's, and the mayor and all were there.

"It's too bad that the days of our youth and joy can't go on forever, isn't it, Kerry? But perhaps we'd get tired of them if they did, too."

# PINK DIAMONDS

*It was a story to hit every headline in the city. It was big, it was bizarre, it was a nine-day wonder. But the reporters missed the most exciting part—the strange and terrifying tale of how a mouse met and overcame a snarling tiger. So here’s the part of the story you didn’t read in your favorite paper.*

## CHAPTER I

### ON THE AVENUE

IT WAS ANOTHER one of those things. There was this diamond salesman who was taking a package of stones up to Barré Brothers on the ninth floor of the Oldfield building, on Fifth Avenue, opposite the big Wambleys-Fifth Avenue department store. He had them in a box in his old overcoat pocket in a striped gray paper bag that had come from the ten-cent store. But that didn’t fool these guys. They knew what was in the package, all right, because they had probably tailed him.

There are always diamond salesmen carrying packages of gems around New York, carrying them as casually as cigarettes. You can’t sell diamonds without showing them, and you can’t go around carrying an armored truck with you in and out of stores and office buildings.

The only thing different about this particular salesman was that the diamonds he was carrying happened to have a great deal more than the average value. There were fifty-two of them, Golconda stones from India, graded from a carat up to a huge one of forty-one carats, all of a pale pink color, matched and perfect. His firm, Wittleheimer’s, had been collecting them for a long time. And they were worth about anything you might care to pay for them, so long as you didn’t start your bidding at anything less than half a million dollars.

Barré Brothers had asked to have them sent over, as they had a potential customer for them, a rich oil man from Texas who was thinking of a necklace for his wife.

The salesman's name was Jim Brady, and of course they called him Diamond Jim, though he was no relation, and he was an old man, sober and honest, who had been with Wittelheimer's more than thirty years.

He stepped into the elevator after a stenographer who was going up, and the elevator man started to close the doors, when a couple of other fellows pushed in. Some said afterward that there were only two of them, and some said there were three. The stenographer remembered only two, but she had been knocked on the head halfway between the first and second floors, and maybe she didn't have time to see all of them—she admitted that she had really looked only at the tall, dark, and handsome one of them, anyway. The elevator man gasped that there had been three, but he was lying on the lobby floor then, with his heart pumping fast away. As for old Diamond Jim, he never said how many, for they blasted him through the kidneys with a dumdummed .45.

They had got to work quick, in other words, as soon as the elevator had started up. It was wham on the stenographer's lovely little occiput from behind, while she was still painting her lips and casting artful glances at the tall, dark, and handsome one, and she went down with a quiet sigh. It was "Stop your car here!" to the elevator man as he started to turn his head. It was "Give 'em to me, you damned old toad, quick!" to Diamond Jim. And then their guns were racketing.

Maybe he made an instinctive gesture to hold on to them; maybe he was just dazed and a split second slow. More likely they were just shooting crazy. The dum-dummed .45 tore through him from behind, and they shot him again through the back of the skull with a .38 as they snatched the package from him and he fell. The elevator man had stopped his car and started to turn around, with each freckle like brown sawdust on his clabber-white face. They gave it to him just below the heart, without a prayer.

It was an old-fashioned elevator—hand operated. One of the gunmen reached for the lever as the collapsing elevator man sagged back against the wall, and sent it down again. They opened the door at street level, eight feet below, and they came out in a blaze of glory. The elevator starter was off duty, down in the basement for a late

lunch and there were no passengers waiting to go up. There was only a cop who was just coming into the building then—not for them, because the meaning of the racket hadn't penetrated to his furry ears yet, and they were moving about as fast as the speed of sound. They came bursting out the car door and at him, and they blasted him with six slugs from four different kinds of guns as they rushed by and out.

THEY WERE CRAZY. They might have had a good chance to get away with it, even after all those murders if they had only calmed down, and had tossed their guns away and had started walking.

But the elevatorman had stumbled out of the car after them a few steps toward the door, gurgling "Murder! Hold-up!", and maybe his voice had sounded louder to them than it was. And they had their guns in their hands, and when a man once gets to shooting it's hard for him to stop. There was the thudding of their feet on the sidewalk as they came rushing out, and they were yelling "Out! Out!", meaning out of the way, and banging off their guns.

Some said that there were only two of them, and some said there were three. People on the sidewalk dodged before them and screamed, and turned like ducks to run. They went racing out across the sidewalk and off the curb, finding their way on the sidewalk blocked by the crowds, and went darting across the crowded traffic of Fifth Avenue in and out between the squealing cars, with women screaming and horns blowing and them yelling and flashing their guns. The main entrance of the big Wambleys-Fifth Avenue department store, which covered a whole block, was across the street, and they went rushing straight across and up the steps and into it, with screaming citizens at the door scampering before them like mice.

It couldn't have been anything that they had planned beforehand. They were just wild to get away. The masses of panic-stricken citizens on the sidewalks prevented them from making their escape up or down the street. It must have occurred to them that the Wambleys-Fifth Avenue store went through to Madison Avenue, which was why they headed for it.



They didn't all make it in through the department store doors, though. There was one of them who stumbled on the bottom step. The traffic cop at the corner had left his post and came running at them. The cop had his gun out, and he was a trick shot with it. His shot went in one ear and out the other; the short ugly little thug wouldn't get up again from where he'd fallen.

"Get him, Ace! He's got Screwball!" someone howled, and on the top step of the entrance of the department store, with citizens running from in front of him and screaming, the tall, dark, and handsome thug—it may have been himself who howled—turned like a mad wolf with guns in both hands, throwing them on the traffic cop, MacGrady.

*Bam! Bam! and bam!* There was a wolf grin of his handsome teeth as MacGrady's knees buckled, and with blood covering all his face and a black hole in the middle of his blue tunic the cop went down. Guns in fists, the murderer turned and went rushing on into Wambleys-Fifth Avenue, sprinting toward the Madison Avenue entrance the length of the store away.

"Out! Out!" he shouted, as the shoppers sprawled and stampeded in the aisles on every side. "Before I blast you! Tricks! Tricks! This way!"

Well, that was the score up to that moment, a diamond salesman and an elevator man dead, two cops, and one of the bandits.

## CHAPTER II

### THUNDER AFTERNOON

PRETTY LITTLE Mrs. Pauline Blodgett was one of the shoppers in Wambleys-Fifth Avenue that day. She was at the stationery counter in the center of the store, buying a desk set for her husband and some writing paper for herself, and looking at the new playing cards, when the bangs sounded on the sidewalk outside and at the door. With a thunder of stampeding feet and screams death came rushing at her.

Pauline Blodgett should never have been downtown shopping that day, or then it would not have happened to

her. She had been feeling a mild touch of grippe, and she had promised her husband faithfully that morning that she would not venture outside of their apartment, but she had not been able to resist the lure of shopping. She was a cute little brown-haired girl, friendly, innocent, and somewhat naïve, who was the daughter of a minister in a little town up state, and had come to live in the big city not so long ago as the bride of up and coming young Assistant District Attorney Tom A. Blodgett.

They had a nice little three-room apartment up on West End Avenue, with sociable neighbors, and she was learning to mix cocktails and play bridge, and be a New York sophisticate. She had a good distance still to go in all three directions, but she was happy. She loved everything about New York, and particularly Fifth Avenue with its crowds and great stores, and the thrill of buying little gadgets to furnish her new home.

She was there at the Wambleys-Fifth Avenue stationery counter making her purchases, and looking over the playing cards indecisively.

"They're very pretty," she said. "But eighty-nine cents is a terrible price, don't you think? I just bought four packs at the dime store for twenty cents apiece, including the tax. They may not be so pretty, but after all they're cards."

"These are very durable if you play cards a great deal," said the sales girl. "You're a bridge player, are you?"

"Not very much of a one," young Mrs. Blodgett confessed, "I am only learning. My husband thinks that I'm still the world's worst. He always sneaks out of the house whenever someone is coming in for a game. He says that he's got to see a man about a dog, but he's never brought any dog back with him, and I think it's just an excuse to go out and play poker. I always bid the wrong thing, it seems, and I never can remember what cards have been played or what trumps are. No, I wouldn't say that I am a bridge player. I am really a card shark."

"A card shark?" said the slightly amazed sales girl, looking at Pauline Blodgett's guileless, lovely face.

"Yes," she said with smiling pleasure. "I have a wonderful card trick which always interests and mystifies people who see me do it. I can name the suit of any card that

you draw from the deck. It always perfectly amazes people."

"Mind reading, I suppose?" said the sales girl.

"Not exactly that," confessed Pauline Blodgett. "It's just a trick that I invented myself. Of course I can't name the number of the card. That would take too many decks. But even naming the suit always seems to everybody like magic."

"It really must be quite amazing," agreed the sales girl dutifully.

"It's my one parlor trick," she said. "But I think that everybody should have one, anyway. You never know when it will come in handy. Well, that's the writing paper and the desk set. I think I'll let the cards go this time. Would you please charge and send? They will be up today? I live up on West End Avenue."

"If you wish, madam, by our late special city delivery service."

"I wonder if it would be too much bother for you to send along my other little packages, too," said Mrs. Blodgett, with the aplomb of a charge customer. "I bought them at the five and ten, but they don't deliver, and I may be doing some more shopping before I'm through."

"Not at all, madam. Just leave them with me. Mrs. Tom A. Blodgett, Apartment 4C, 1104 West End Avenue, is the charge, and the delivery is the same—"

The face of the sales girl behind the counter seemed to go star-white. Casting a glance to one side, she opened her mouth to scream. "Watch out!" she cried, ducking down behind the counter.

IT WAS AT that instant that Pauline Blodgett became aware of the rush of feet, the screams, the shots, all simultaneously. The figure of some man was rushing down the aisle. It went past her as she half turned with a breathless terror.

There were more figures rushing toward her, a horde of screaming, stampeding people, a tall dark blazing-eyed man with guns in his hands sprinting madly. She heard screams, "Stop him! Stop him! Murder!" And the banging of guns. "Out! Out!" he snarled, as he rushed toward her.

It had all burst on her consciousness together. It was all happening with the speed of sound. She could not move.

"Please!" she gasped, with her hands pressed against her breast.

Her knees collapsed beneath her. She crouched on the floor in the aisle, huddled against the counter, with her head bent. "Out! Out!" gasped the tall dark murderer, rushing past her with sobbing breath, and the guns in his hands banged, and the screaming and the roar was everywhere.

At the Madison Avenue exit of the store, or maybe just on the sidewalk outside, a fusillade of shots smacked the ear almost as one. Tall, Dark, and Handsome had rushed straight through, but at the far door he had been met by four cops as he emerged, and their guns were leveled at his belly as he threw his own at them. He gave that half-scream, drowned in the roar of guns, and his look was twisted and frozen in its wolf grin as he flung his arms out sideways and bent his head and seemed to dive head-long at them. He was about cut in two.

It had all happened in a couple of minutes, maybe in less than one minute, but people would still be arguing about it for a long time afterward. Some said, for instance, that Tall, Dark, and Handsome had started to run through the store, before turning swiftly and rushing back out to the front entrance again, with that bloodthirsty howl of "Get him, Ace! He's got Screwball!", when the ugly little thug following him had stumbled and gone down beneath MacGrady's bullet.

Some said that he had not yet entered the store, but had turned there at the top of the steps just at the door like a wild wolf, throwing them out at MacGrady. Some said that it wasn't he who had given that bloodthirsty howl at all, but a third one who had been with them—that there had been three of them.

Some even said that there had been four or five or half a dozen. But others said that there had been only two of them, and that the yell had come from some citizen, hollering in horror and excitement, and that what the citizen had cried had been, "Get him Ace! He's gone screwball!" Citizens sometimes yell insane things like that when they are agitated.

It was hard, in fact it was impossible, for police or reporters to reconstruct in every detail just precisely what had happened.

There were guns scattered all over the sidewalks front and rear, and bodies, and people still running and screaming on Fifth and Madison, and some citizens getting pushed down and hurt, and then it was all over. But it was a terrifying experience for everybody while it lasted. It was no wonder that some people thought that there had been more than two of them, and maybe half a dozen.

IT WAS A pretty terrifying experience for young Mrs. Pauline Blodgett, who had been as near to the tall, dark and handsome gunman as anyone, or even nearer, and who had escaped by inches. If she had fallen in front of him, for instance, instead of huddling down against the counter out of his way, as he came mad-eyed, rushing, snarling, "Out! Out! Before I blast you!" She could very well feel that death had brushed her by, literally. That for a moment she had felt the sweeping of his coat-sleeve.

The terror of it still shook her as she picked herself to her feet. "Oh, my goodness!" she said. "Oh, my goodness! Did they kill him?"

"They must have," breathed the pallid girl who had arisen behind the counter. "Did you get a look at him? Eyes of fire! He had a gun in his hand! He was glaring right at us! I thought he was going to stop and jump over behind the counter! That was when I ducked!"

"He just ran past," said Pauline Blodgett, shaken. "With his glaring eyes. I don't think he even saw us. Snarling 'Out! Out!' And shooting off the guns in his hands."

"I thought it was the cops after him hollering 'Out! Out!' that way, and shooting."

"No, it was him. It was he," said Pauline Blodgett. "He had two guns in his hands."

"I only saw one, but that was enough! The way he was looking at you, as if he would devour you! And so silent!"

"No, he was thudding," said Pauline Blodgett. "I remember how his feet came thudding."

"I thought that was one of the cops, passing by," the sales girl said. "Believe me, I wouldn't have been out there where you were for a million dollars! He must have brushed you right by!"

"He did," said Pauline Blodgett. "Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness! All the policemen coming in. Will they have

it in the papers? I'll never dare to let my husband know that I was here when it happened. He would worry himself to death, thinking how closely I had escaped."

"You're leaving your packages, madam. Oh, you wanted them sent," the salesgirl said. "They should be delivered this evening before eight. Will they have it in the papers?" she said. "A gunman in Wambleys-Fifth Avenue! Well, I'll say."

She gathered up the parcels on the counter to be wrapped for delivery with Mrs. Blodgett's purchases. Pauline Blodgett had already turned away, hurrying anxiously for a door.

Cops were swarming through the store with drawn guns. There were a hundred of them in no time at all, and every door was covered.

At the side exit through which people were being let out one by one cops and newspapermen were gathered. "Did you see him?" they asked Pauline Blodgett. She shook her head. It was not in any way a misstatement. She had not seen him. Just the impression of a rushing, mad-eyed, snarling figure amidst a stampeding throng coming toward her, and a bang of guns. That was after the salesgirl had screamed, and she had half turned around. There had been some fleeing men then who had brushed her by, but she had seen him even less.

"No," Pauline Blodgett told them at the door. "I just heard shots and screams and saw all the running. I didn't see him."

But she had felt him, yes. He had brushed her by.

The police sergeant in charge at the door looked at her and nodded, letting her pass. They couldn't demand names and credentials from every one of the thousand or two shoppers in the great store, and they were letting the women go, so long as they didn't look too much like gun-molls. Mrs. Pauline Blodgett was obviously an innocent, as well as a darling, and when she had no information to give the cops or reporters she was allowed to escape.

OR SO IT SEEMED to her that she was escaping. From the rush of those pounding feet, from the madness of those glaring eyes, from the blood and sweat and horror of men who had killed, and killed again without remorse. Oh, she had been near death, as near as anyone who had been in

the store in those brief seconds, but it was over now. Yet tonight perhaps she would think differently.

At the nearest telephone pay-station, two blocks down the Avenue, young Mrs. Blodgett stopped in and called up her husband at his office, just to hear his voice.

"Tom!" she said. "Oh, Tom darling!"

"What do you want, toots?" grumbled young Assistant District Attorney Tom A. Blodgett. "Has something happened?"

"No," she said weakly. "I just thought I'd call you up, Tom."

She wanted to tell him, but she couldn't. Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference.

"Your voice sounded a little funny. I suppose it's your cold. You're staying in bed today, are you, as you promised you would? How's the flu progressing?"

"It's much better, I think, Tom. I just wanted to call you up to know if you are going to be home to dinner, or whether you've got to work tonight. The Smiths want to come over this evening and play some bridge with me, you know nice deaf old Mr. Smith and his wife who live upstairs."

"I suppose you are planning to show them your fancy card trick, are you?" said Tom Blodgett with a laugh.

"Well, I don't think they've seen it, and it's a very good trick," she said defensively. "I invented it myself."

"Listen, toots," said Tom Blodgett, "that trick wouldn't fool a seven-year-old. It's a comedy. So are you, if you think you know anything about cards. You don't even know yet how many there are in the deck, I'll bet you. All you know is that there are four suits. And it was to a guy like me, to whom cards are a beauty and a science, an art, a skill, and a religion, that you had to get yourself married."

"I love you anyway, toots. But you'd better get somebody else for your bridge game tonight. The Smiths have that pimple-headed nephew who lives with them. The one with the adenoids and the fish eyes. He ought to be a good fourth for the kind of game you play. I'd love to be with you honestly, toots, but I think I'll stay downtown and work late tonight, so long as you're having company. As the saying goes, 'I've got to see a man about a dog' "

She could see him in her mind's eye, big-shouldered, square-faced, dimpled, sitting at the phone in his office and laughing at her. Winking, maybe, at his secretary or at some cop in the office with him. She felt quite inferior and helpless. Her big Tom was so much a man of the world, and he liked to tease her so.

"I don't believe you even know a man who has a dog," she said accusingly. "It's just your excuse to get away to play some poker with some of your horrible men friends, those men you call Bob and Tug."

"Well," he said, "I do admit that I like a keen close game in its time and place. But I like you, toots, in yours. Wait a minute, what's that? Holdup and triple murder in the Oldfield Building—"

His voice trailed off. It came back in a moment. "Sorry, toots," he said shortly. "Got a lot of business on hand here at the office. Call just came in on another wire about a nasty job in the midtown district. Jewel holdup and a lot of other unpleasantness. Gunmen rushing through your favorite store, Wambleys-Fifth Avenue. I'm damned glad you weren't downtown today. I'd have been worried crazy about you. You're all right, are you, toots?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Tom," said little Mrs. Pauline Blodgett weakly.

And she really thought she was.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE GRAY MAN

SHE WENT OUT of the shop where she had telephoned, and on the corner she stepped aboard a Riverside bus which would take her up near her home. Two blocks up the avenue the bus brought her again in front of Wambleys-Fifth Avenue, and the throngs on the sidewalk were still thick about there, the cops were still at the doors, letting people out slowly. As the bus paused a minute or two in front of the main entrance, caught in the traffic, Pauline Blodgett pressed her face to the window, staring out.

"They think there may be a third one of them," she heard one of her fellow passengers say. "They're search-



ing the store for him high and low. They haven't found the diamonds."

As she looked, she saw uniformed policemen coming out of the front entrance with two or three men whom they were keeping a firm grip on, a big tousel-headed fellow, hatless, with a dark swarthy face, a thin, shifty, red-haired man, and perhaps one or two more. But even the cops didn't look very much convinced that they had got hold of anybody.

A third murderer still uncaught! Perhaps there had been two who had gone past her. She remembered now that first figure drifting silently past behind her, as the sales-girl had ducked and screamed, and she had half turned from the counter. She had thought that he was only one of the terrified throng. But he had been so quiet of footfall and so silent of breath, now that she thought of it. It gave Pauline Blodgett the creeps to think of him so near behind her, brushing her with his coat-sleeve as he passed.

From somewhere among that little throng about the entrance of Wambleys-Fifth Avenue, in that moment she felt someone looking at her as she sat in the bus with her face pressed against the window. She could not identify who it was. Yet it was as if there was a threat in those unseen eyes upon her, a terrible menace.

The bus jerked and went on, and the scene faded behind her. It had not been the big, dark, sullen fellow whom the cops had hold of with a firm grip who had been looking at her, nor yet the thin shifty red-haired man. Just someone in the general scene. But it seemed to Pauline Blodgett now that she had caught a glimpse, as the bus went forward, of those eyes among the crowd. For the moment it seemed to her that there had been almost a red glow in them, a four-pointed lozenge-shaped glow like the high card of diamonds.

It had been only some trick of the early autumnal sunset, of course, reflected from a window and into the eyes of someone in that little crowd about Wambleys-Fifth Avenue. If it had been anything more than her own creepy imagination. If there had been any evil in that look upon her, Pauline Blodgett told herself, the man who had given it did not know her name or where she lived, in this vast city of seven million people, where everyone is wrapped in anonymity, and she would not see him again.

And so she went on home, young Mrs. Pauline Blodgett, to her apartment on West End Avenue.

MEANTIME AT Wambleys-Fifth Avenue the police were going through every floor of the store, and would be going through it for a long time to come. They had been at all entrances in almost no time at all after the shooting had begun. In time enough to blast down Tall, Dark, and Handsome as he had come bursting out of the Madison Avenue door. In time to have caught any other killer before he could have emerged, it would seem, if there had been another.

For there was still that confusion of testimony as to whether there had been only two, or a third one of them, who had come rushing from the Oldfield Building. But the general consensus appeared to be that there had been a third man who had run into the store just ahead of Tall, Dark, and Handsome, though no one could describe him.

There was the matter of shouts and voices, for one thing. That wild howl, "Get him. Ace! He's got Screwball!" Tall, Dark, and Handsome might have howled it to himself, but it didn't seem the most likely possibility. And even less likely that it could have been a citizen calling for ice. Moreover, Tall, Dark, and Handsome had gone rushing through the store afterwards screaming, "Tricks!! Tricks!" There were some who remembered that now, with all his other shouting. As if he had been calling to someone ahead of him, who deserved a tricky name.

There was the matter of the shouts, and there was the matter of the gun. Of the .33 which a stock-room boy found in the bottom of a canvas stock-bin not far from the Madison Avenue door. Since the tall dark thug had gone down with his big blasting .45 still in one fist and his neat belly-punching .22 in the other, it could hardly have been an extra gun which he had thrown away as he raced by. Particularly since the fingerprints had been wiped from it.

They let the women shoppers out, but they looked over every man, and held for investigation every one who was in the slightest degree suspicious, and perhaps some who weren't. They found Gorilla Maroni, who had just been released from Sing Sing, in a washroom in the basement, and there were people who had seen the Gorilla running down the stairs and ducking in there.

They found Red Helsey, who trailed with the Gumbo mob, up in the toy department on the eighth floor, and since he didn't have any kids, what was he doing there? They picked up a lemon-skinned, freckled mulatto hiding behind a shirt counter on the main floor, and he said that he had only come into the store looking for the employment office, but they took him along, anyway.

They even picked up a small, mild, gray-haired citizen who was standing behind a pillar not far from the Madison Avenue exit, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief; they picked him up because someone said that they had seen a man dart behind there. They detained all of those, and perhaps a dozen more.

None of them had the diamonds on him, though, and none, of course, was armed. There were no witnesses who could identify any of them, except that perhaps at some moment or another during the shooting they had been seen in swift movement. But who hadn't been ducking, darting, or dodging? There was no evidence.

IT WAS THE fact that the diamonds were not found which weakened the conviction of the police that they had had the killer boxed in; for they knew now that there had been a third killer and that he had run into Wambleys-Fifth Avenue. The ballistics men had brought in their report that the .38 which had been found in the store was the same gun which had sent a bullet through the back of old Diamond Jim's skull and drilled the elevator man beneath the heart.

He had thrown away the gun, but he hadn't thrown away the diamonds, or they would have been found after not too long a search, like the gun itself. A flock of beautiful red diamonds worth half a million dollars, for which a man had done murder twice over. It was not in the cards, perhaps, that he would have tossed them away, no matter how hot and desperate his situation; with one chance in a thousand of holding on to them. If there had been time for him to have planted them in a secure hiding place, that would have been another story. But there were no hiding places he could have found in those few minutes.

As to the possibility of there having been a confederate planted in the store to whom he might have swiftly

passed the jewels, that was ruled out by the circumstances. The break into the department store had not been planned. What had been planned, of course, had been to conk old Diamond Jim down, and the elevator man, and then go quietly out of the Oldfield Building and dissolve away in the crowds.

That had been the perfected idea. But few criminal ideas work out to perfection. They had had guns in their hands, and they had gone wild and shooting crazy. Only one of them, the brainiest one of them, of course, the one who had had the diamonds, had caught his breath somewhere in that rush through Wembleys.

Had caught his breath, perhaps realizing that the terrified people all around were not looking at him, but at Tall, Dark, and Handsome behind him. Somewhere there in Wembleys that third killer, the man with the diamonds, had begun to use his head. He had calmed down and stepped aside, throwing his gun away after wiping it. But not the diamonds. They had vanished, and so he must have vanished with them.

THE REPORT from the FBI on the fingerprints of the two dead thugs didn't give any lead as to who that vanished third man might have been. The dead thugs had come from the West. They had been picked up here and there at different times over the country as vagrants, but there was no particular criminal record. They hadn't been tied to each other before, either.

"What are we going to do with these fellows we picked up inside of Wembleys, Inspector?"

"I'd damned near forgotten about them. What time is it now, half-past seven?"

"Yes, we've been holding them almost four hours. There're some of them getting a little impatient."

"Got anything on any of 'em?"

"No. A couple of them have records, Gorilla Maroni and Red Helsey, but this wasn't a New York mob. There's a lemon-colored smoke with freckles who was down behind the shirts. He was dressed in a bright green suit and a bright red tie and bright yellow shoes, though, and it seems as if somebody ought to have remembered him if he had been one of the killers running from the Oldfield

Building. The rest of them are just citizens, not too well identified."

"We'll have them identify themselves and let them go, if the identification is all right."

The quiet and slight mild gray-haired citizen who had been found behind a pillar not far from the Madison Avenue door, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, waited quietly his turn to be questioned.

"My name is Charles J. Ross," he said. "I am an oil man from Texas. I am stopping in town at the Hotel Mordaunt on upper Broadway. Here are my car and driver's licences. Here are a couple of old letters I happen to have with me from my banker and my secretary. I imagine that if you telegraphed them they would tell you that Charles J. Ross is all right."

"How long have you been staying in New York, Mr. Ross?"

"About a week now. I motored east for a vacation."

"Is there anyone in town who could identify you?"

"Yes, I think so," he said. "I know Assistant District Attorney Tom A. Blodgett quite well, if you will let me call him up. Though I would hate to have him know that I am caught in such a ridiculous position."

"You aren't under arrest, you know," said the inspector, a little uneasily. "It was just a matter of asking you to come downtown to cooperate, if you might have any information. Your name hasn't been given to the newspapers. I'm sorry we've kept you waiting so long, but the fact is we've overlooked you. Why didn't you say that you knew Blodgett in the first place?"

"I don't like to take advantage of my friends," said the mild gray man. "I haven't minded so much just sitting here thinking. But now it is getting late."

"Of course, it's understandable that you don't like to involve your friends. If you don't mind calling up Blodgett, Mr. Ross, though, just as a matter of identification. I don't know if you'll find him in his office this late. Do you know his home address?"

The face of the quiet gray man from Texas looked singularly quiet and gray in that moment, thought the inspector.

"No," he said. "I've never been in his home. I'll try his office first, if you'll let me use the phone. If he's gone home, I'll have to think of something else."

"Think of something else than what?"

"Of getting him away—of getting in touch with him."

"Well, here's the phone."

The quiet gray man called up Tom Blodgett's office.

"Hello, Tom," he said. "This is Charlie Ross."

"Charlie who?"

"Charlie Ross, from Texas. You've met me playing poker at Tug Corny's, the newspaperman's."

"Oh, yes, how are you, Charlie?"

"I thought I might organize a game at my place tonight, the Hotel Mordaunt on upper Broadway. Get Tug and Bob and some of the rest of the gang who sometimes play. Wanted to know if you could come around."

"Sure, you know me. I always like a good close game with Tug and Bob and the gang. My wife's having a bridge game tonight, and I wanted to duck it, anyway. About what time?"

"As soon as you can make it."

"I'm caught at my office here, but I'll be around. The Hotel Mordaunt, eh? Why, that's only a couple of blocks from my home. Right at the subway station where I drop off. Sure, I'll be there, Charlie."

"I'll count on you. And, Tom."

"Yeah?"

"Here's a guy here arguing that I'm not Charlie Ross. Would you mind telling him?"

"Why shouldn't you be Charlie Ross?"

"He says Charlie Ross was kidnapped down in Pennsylvania about eighty years ago, and has never been found since."

"Haw, haw! That a good one. Sure you're Charlie Ross, tell your drunken barfly friend. See you later, Charlie."

The little gray man hung quietly up. He turned to the inspector beside him, inquiringly.

"Playing poker with a D.A.," said the police officer, not without admiration. "I guess you're all right, Mr. Ross. Even if you weren't kidnapped down in Pennsylvania."

AT THE OTHER end of the wire big square-faced Tom A. Blodgett sat smiling as he put his phone back down in its

cradle. That joke had tickled him. Charlie Ross from Texas, he remembered him. That little gray fellow who had been at Tug Corny's the last time he was there.

They had played poker all night. A good keen player, and a tough one to read, whether or not he had the cards. Inclined to be a little wild and reckless in his play at times, but he always checked himself and pulled in his horns before he had gone too far. After eight hours at a poker table you get to know a man pretty well like that. At least well enough to call him Charlie.

Still, he had been put in the position of identifying, if not of actually recommending, a man whom he didn't know beyond that one meeting, Tom Blodgett was shrewd enough to realize. He had a genial and sociable disposition, but he was also very alert. A D.A. has to be cagey about people who may use his name for their own purposes. The fellow hadn't said where he was calling from. Tom Blodgett's face was reflective. He picked up his phone again before he had quite released it, and called up Tug Corny at his office.

Tug Corny worked on the lobster shift of an afternoon newspaper, and was still on deck. "Who's this guy Charlie Ross from Texas, Tug?" said Tom Blodgett.

"Ross?" said Tug Corny. "Why, he's a prince. A hell of a nice guy. Owns a big Cadillac and has lots of dough. Oil wells, I think, out in Texas. Did I ever tell you how I met him?"

"No."

"Why, I was driving down in Pennsylvania a week or two ago in my old jalopy, and Ross's car sideswiped me. Knocked my bus all galley-west. He had been going too fast, but maybe I had been hogging the road, too. It was in one of these little towns, and the local constable was going to lock us both up for reckless driving. I didn't have a cent with me, either.

"But Ross soothed the constable down with a half C note that he took out of a wallet fat as a horse's neck, and asked me how much my car had been worth when I started the old boiler act about suing him. I told him five C's, though it hadn't cost me but a hundred and twenty-five, and he peeled off the money and gave it to me."

"You're a crook, Tug."

"Sure I am, and I know it. But Charlie Ross is a nice guy, is what I mean. Most men wouldn't have paid out anything, they would have raised an argument and told me to go to hell first, because I had been some to blame, too, and his own car was dented.

"He gave me a lift on into New York, though he had a couple of hitch-hikers already with him in the back seat that he took into New York, too. Not every fellow in a big car with a lot of cash on him that way will pick up hitch-hikers, and I wouldn't have trusted those two mugs myself for a nickel. But he's a guy like that. I guess they grow that way out in Texas. On his tombstone they ought to chisel, Here lies Charlie Ross, he trusted his fellow men. He's a prince, is what I mean. He showed me pictures of his daughter and his boat that he had got with him, and his big place out in Texas. And, boy, is she a honey. The daughter, I mean. Why do you ask about him?"

"He's organizing a poker game at his hotel this evening. He wants us to come around. I guess he'll call you up."

"Suits me well enough. I'm feeling as lucky now as I ever do."

Tom Blodgett cut the connection, and called his home.

"Hi, toots," he said. "Still at it. Don't know when I'll break away. Enjoy your bridge game and your card tricks, and get to bed early. I may stop off for a little poker game with the boys before I come home."

"With that Tug and all of them! That means you won't be in till six in the morning, I know it!"

"Not later than half-past five, toots, I swear it."

"Where can I reach you, if I should want to?"

"The game is going to be at the Hotel Mordaunt, Mr. Charles J. Ross's room. Why should you want to reach me, toots?"

"I don't know," she said—and her voice sounded to him a little sad and desolate, and he would always remember it. "I just like to feel that I am always able to reach you, Tom."

"Well, you can call me there for anything," he said. But she would never call.



## CHAPTER IV

### DIAMOND DECK

THE QUIET GRAY man went quietly out of police headquarters, onto the street. It was late. They had kept him waiting hours and hours in there. But perhaps it was not too late.

He was only thirty years old, though he was gray, and it was not easy to control the vigor in him, the urge to run and run. But a man was always a fool to run, or to make any commotion, or to make any noise.

My God, they had had him! They had all been at the doors of Wambleys so quick, and running in and through the store with their guns, yanking and grabbing at everybody. And they had actually had him. Nothing to do but play it quietly. But that had won.

He would like to run now. Run, run! Faster, faster. Madly. But he didn't. He walked quietly. He even paused to light a cigarette, and toss the burnt match into the gutter beside him.

He wasn't being tailed. He hadn't thought that he would be. If they had had a thing on him, with two cops killed, they would never have let him get away. No, it was no cat-and-mouse. He was clear.

He had played it quietly, and his credentials had been good. But how near they had had him! He had just darted behind the pillar there in Wambleys, had wiped the gun and tossed it, and they had grabbed him with his handkerchief still in his hand. If he could get away with that, he could get away with anything.

He was glad that he didn't have his gun any more. He would never trust himself with one again, in his hand and banging. Banging and banging, and it made you crazy with the blood-lust and the excitement and terror, and you had to run and yell, and it was hard to stop. Oh, he had been a fool, with that gun in his hand, and those two other crazy fools running and yelling. But no more of that.

The things he had done best, he had always done the quietest. Like the time he had clubbed the Widow Clancy down in her kitchen as a boy while she had been spreading a piece of bread with jam for him, and had stolen her

savings in the tin can behind the clock on the kitchen shelf, and her never opening her eyes again to look at him, or her lips to tell on him.

Like the two girls in the park in Chi. Like the old guy in the big Cadillac car who had given him a lift along the road in Ohio ten days ago. The old guy had been talking along about his oil companies, and about his vacation in New York when he was going to get away from it all for a whole month, and nobody was going to know where he was or what he was doing.

Then he had stopped to show some pictures of his home and daughter, and had never seen the sap which hit him and broke the vertebrae of his neck, it had been done so quietly. And where the Monongahela's shores are steep and wooded, in a bottomless ravine deep down off the road, he was lying now, and no one would ever find him.

That was the way to do it, quietly. Finish it off and hide the evidence. So smooth that maybe nobody would even know that a crime had been committed, and there would be no pursuit. It would be a good many weeks before people began to get worried back in Texas about old Charlie Ross. Long before that time he himself would have faded quietly out of the picture. Maybe by that time he would have cashed in on those rocks. Those great pink rocks from the job today. When a guy had them cashed in on, he could live like a king forever.

IT HAD BEEN the next day, he remembered, after bopping the old guy and dumping his carcass, that he had given a lift to Screwball, who had thumbed him on the road as he headed on east in the big Cadillac; and then a hundred miles or so later he had picked up the Ace. They had been a couple of good tough babies. Ace came from Arizona, where two guns are in style, at least to hear him tell it. Screwball didn't even know where he had come from, and maybe better not.

It was funny how he got wise to the two of them giving the nod to each other in the back seat, to knock him off and cop the car themselves. He had got a kick out of that. Even a couple of guys on the make like them, guys who had been around, had thought he was nothing but a mug, a citizen. They had named him Tricks when he had tipped his hand to them.

Well, he had needed to have plenty of tricks today. It had been pretty awful. The way those two tough guys had been blasted down, and the cops even laying their hands on him.

Screwball and the Ace had been too tough and ignorant for him, he should have figured it when he first picked them up. They had thrown him off his base. They weren't his style. He remembered when they had been streaking through Pennsylvania, and he had sideswiped a car. Right in the middle of a village it had been, boxed in by a lot of traffic, no clear getaway at all. But even so those two birds had wanted to grab their rods and start shooting.

They had been that dumb. He had handled it in the right way, of course, smoothing down the hick cop at the scene, and paying off the squawking citizen whatever he asked, and inviting the citizen to take a ride along. Nice and gentlemanly like. He had had it in his mind, naturally, for them all to give the citizen a working over at some good quiet spot a little farther along the road, and dump him out somewhere on the Jersey flats.

He didn't know why he hadn't. Except that the citizen had turned out to be a newspaperman, and those guys have contacts. He had used his head, and figured it was better to string the citizen along. He had given the lay-off signal to Ace and Screwball in the back seat, with their mouths watering like dogs at meat. And it had paid dividends. This guy Tug Corny had felt obligated to him. Look at him, calling up a D.A. to play poker with him.

He was clear now. But they had kept him stewing a long time in there. Hours and hours, just waiting. If he had been a thumb-biter, he would have chewed his away, thinking of the Wambleys late delivery truck cruising all over the streets of Manhattan, stopping at this apartment house and that one, and maybe some dirty sneak-thief coming along and grabbing a package while the driver was making a delivery. That would be sweet, wouldn't it? Some dirty sneak-thief grabbing what belonged to him, grabbing those beautiful pink stones, and fading out.

But they always watched those trucks, when he thought of it. They had a system of helpers to deliver. It was only the time element that he needed to worry about. To get there before they had been delivered. At least before that brown-haired innocent-eyed dame with the clear, pretty

voice had opened the package, and opened her mouth and squawked.

It was funny, he hadn't figured her as the wife of Tom Blodgett, the D.A., when he had heard her give her name and address, and the sales girl mechanically repeating it, in that moment as he came running frantically along the aisle. He hadn't really thought about it till the big gold-shielded cop back there had asked him if he knew Blodgett's home address. That was a honey. Killing two birds with one stone. Killing. . . .

It was late. He must run. No, not run, but move with unobtrusive speed. Move fast, and move surely, and get those stones.

HE STOPPED in a cigar store at the subway corner, and phoned the night number of Wambleys-Fifth Avenue. "This is A.B. Trix," he said, speaking the first name that came into his head. "I live up on West End Avenue. I ordered some goods from your store this afternoon to be delivered today. About what time can I expect them?"

"You live where, Mr.—?"

He thought the voice sounded alarmed.

"Hicks," he said. "H-i-c-k-s. I live on West End."

"I thought at first you said your name was Tricks. I guess we're all a little excited around here. There was a holdup—"

"Yeah, I read about it in the papers. About what time?"

"Why, you ought to expect them any time, if they were going on the special late city delivery. If they were promised for today, they will certainly be there. Wambleys-Fifth Avenue prides itself on its service. However, if you care to wait, I can look up your sales record and make sure—"

"Never mind," he said.

He called up the Evening Globe then, and got Tug Corny there. "Charlie Ross speaking," he said. "I'm organizing a game at my place tonight."

"Yeah, Tom Blodgett called me up and told me. I'll be there, Charlie."

"Call up Bob and what's that guy's name and the rest of them for me, will you, Tug? You know all their names and addresses. All them—those guys that I met at that last poker party of yours I was at."

"Sure, I'll get the gang, Charlie. As many as I can on such short notice. What's the matter with you? You sound all hot and bothered."

"I got a jane here with me, Tug."

"Well, maybe you aren't bothered."

"They never bother me."

"Get him ice!" said the newspaperman on the phone, laughing. "He's gone screwball."

"What's that you said?" asked the quiet gray killer.

"That's a new gag that's just started going around the town, Charlie. You haven't heard it yet? There was a big stickup on Fifth Avenue this afternoon, you see, couple of citizens killed, two cops shot down, holdup guys running everywhere. They got two of them, but the cops are still looking for another.

"The gag is this—that in the midst of all the excitement somebody hollered something that sounded like 'Get him, Ace! He's got Screwball!' But some of them claim that what was really hollered was only, 'Get him ice! He's gone screwball!' So it's a kind of new gag that's starting, see, Charlie? Every time a guy sounds a little agitated, you are supposed to say that to him, and it's supposed to get a laugh. We're going to start a Get Him Ice! column in the paper tomorrow, with five dollars for the best Get Him Ice gags contributed. It ought to be good for a week."

"I'll get the ice, all right," said the quiet gray man.

"He's gone screwball," said Tug Corny happily. "See you later, Charlie."

The quiet gray killer went out. Newspapers stacked on the subway newsstand had big headlines. Smeared clear across the pages in big black type, bigger than the war in Europe.

Deck of Diamonds Stolen! said the various headlines. All Pink Deck Vanishes in Bloody Holdup on 5th Avenue! Six Men Die in Battle over Vanished Quadruple Flush. And one, more succinct and grimmer, 52 Diamonds, 6 Spades.

The fact that there had happened to be precisely fifty-two of the beautiful pink Golconda stones in old Diamond Jim's priceless package had struck the imagination of all headline writers, of course. The Diamond Deck, the stolen vanished stones were already being called. So another nonsensical phrase had been born out of that bloody hor-

ror of the afternoon on Fifth Avenue to spread swiftly through the town.

The Diamond Deck. . .

## CHAPTER V

### A QUIET WAY IS BEST

PAULINE BLODGETT cut the cord and tore open the heavy outer wrapping paper of the package which had just been delivered from Wambleys-Fifth Avenue. Inside there was corrugated board, and inside that, neatly packed and stowed away, the purchases which she had made at Wambleys, together with those from the five and ten which she had left to be delivered.

The uniformed deliveryman had rung her bell a moment ago and had passed the package hastily to her at the door, with an inquiring, "Mrs. Blodgett?" She had brought the package in and laid it on her living room couch to open it. She took one of the gray-striped envelopes out of the wrappings which she had half ripped apart. That must be the four packs of playing cards which she had bought in the dime store.

Her bridge table was set up in the living room, ready for the arrival of deaf old Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their fish-eyed, adenoidal nephew. They were not due for twenty minutes yet, but she had felt a little nervous and lonely, and had set up the table and chairs around it, and laid out score card and pencil. It made it seem less lonely in the small quiet apartment; even the empty chairs helped. The clock ticked on the mantel.

She went into the bathroom and got from the cabinet one of Tom's old razor blades, and then in her little kitchenette in the cupboard above the sink she found the mucilage jar. She sat down at the bridge table with them, and dumped the cards out from their envelope onto the table.

Carefully, bending her brown head, she shaved under the government seals on each pack, and opened the cardboard containers. She removed the inner glassine wrappings with the same care. Setting the jokers aside, she sorted the packs face up, and rearranged them. She

then turned them over, and with the bridge pencil marked each card delicately on its back.

Having done so, she re-inserted the packs in their glassine wrappers, with their jokers, and with a tiny touch from the rubber lip of the mucilage jar she sealed up the wrappers again, and restored them to their boxes. With the same care she glued down the government stamps again.

She was committing a criminal act, though in her innocence she didn't know it. Also an immoral and highly unethical one. Marking cards for any purpose is never excusable, and well-brought up people don't do it even as a joke, any more than they practice copying other people's signatures.

Pauline Blodgett, however, had not been well-brought up in respect to cards. She had no understanding of the ethics of them, any more than of how to play them. She didn't know, in fact, that there was anything which could be called either ethical or unethical about cards. She had always been taught that they were an invention of the Devil anyway, and that just to handle them or even look at them was in itself a sin. And so when one is dealing with the Devil it doesn't seem to make it any worse to paint him with a few spots.

She didn't understand anything about card games, and she never would. But she had married a man who loved them, who had a keen instinct for them, and who seemed to judge people and to hold them in respect or contempt, by the way they played cards. She wanted earnestly to understand them herself and be a brilliant card player, so that her big Tom would look at her with admiration and respect, and treat her somewhat less like an idiot child.

They were, however, still pretty much all Greek to her. There were, of course, those, those four different kinds of funny markings that cards had, some black and some red, and those were called the suits. She knew that much about them. Then in addition there were different numbers on them, or else pictures, the aces which had one spot on them, and the other cards which might have anywhere from two up to nine or eleven spots, and kings and queens and jacks and knaves, and she didn't know quite how many else.

And people seemed to get excited about them. One kind of card was worth more than another, or one was worth less, and then you won or lost the game. It was all very complicated and incredible. She would never get all the numbers in her head. But she had learned the different suits.

THE ONLY ACTUAL experience which she had had with cards before she had married Tom Blodgett had been in watching a magician once at a children's party who had pulled cards out of his hat and out of his trouser's cuffs and the back of his neck, and then had pulled a whole pack out of her hair, which had made all the other children laugh at her. (She was thinking of childhood days tonight, she didn't know quite why, but she felt a little desolate and sad and lonely, listening to the clock tick.) And then he had asked everybody to select a card, and without looking at it he had told them just what card it was.

It had all been very wonderful. One of the memorable events of her childhood, which hadn't been very replete with parties and good times. So cards were still associated in her mind with magic, even more than with games. And so she had invented, as she thought, now that she was married to her big Tom and was allowed to have cards in the house, this perfectly marvelous and mysterious trick of asking people to take a card, and then telling them what it was. Not the number, of course; she got the numbers all mixed up. But anyway, the suit.

She liked to show off her little trick before a bridge game. It always amazed and mystified people. Anyway, they always expressed polite surprise. Then if she didn't play a very good game afterward, they would still not have such a bad opinion of her, because she had showed them such a clever trick.

She was such an innocent, young Mrs. Tom A. Blodgett. Big smart keen men like Tom Blodgett generally manage to draw that kind in the lottery. And it's fun to have them and to love them and to tease them. But God knows a man ought to take care of them, too.

"Now," she said aloud with a pretty smile, laying the re-stored decks out on the table, one before each place, including her own, and speaking as if the others were al-



ready there, "now perhaps before we begin to play you would like me to show you a little card trick. You would? All right. I'll see if I can do it.

"Now, Mr. Smith, would you pick up the deck in front of you, and shuffle the cards thoroughly, please, and cut them three or four times? That's right, give them a good shuffle. Now cut them, Cut them again. Now select a card, any card, it doesn't matter which. Look at it, but don't tell me. I am going to try to tell what suit it is."

She pressed her hands to her temples, with an air of concentration. "Spade!" she said. "Is that right? Yes, spade it is, I see, Mr. Smith. Now which other one of you would like to have me try to guess a card? You, Mrs. Smith, or you, Eggleston? All right, Mrs. Smith, you shuffle—"

The clock ticked. It helped her to pass the time to practice her innocent little trick. Her big Tom always laughed at it as if his sides would burst, but it did fool a lot of people. At least they pretended that it did.

The elevator stopped in the corridor outside, with a soft, muffled thud of doors. She started, she didn't know just why. She looked toward the door, waiting and listening, with her lips half parted. But it was someone going to another apartment on the floor. Not for her.

"Now, Eggleston," she said, "I want you to shuffle and take a card, the way your uncle and your aunt—"

A bell rang.

THE FRONT DOOR bell, was it? No, the telephone, of course, just inside the bedroom. She arose and went to it. She picked it up from her boudoir table, a little breathless, with a hope. Perhaps it was Tom. Maybe he had finished his work at the office, and had decided not to go to his poker game, after all. Maybe he was coming home.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello?" said a thin dry creaky voice.

"Hello!" she said. "What number did you want?"

"Hello?" said the thin creaky voice. "Hello, is this Mrs. Blodgett?"

"Yes, this is Mrs. Blodgett! Is that you, Mr. Smith?"

"Hello, Mrs. Blodgett. This is Mr. Smith, your neighbor up above," he creaked. "I am afraid we shall have to postpone the bridge game till another evening, Mrs.

Blodgett. Eggleston had to go out to one of his choir practices, he informed us at dinner, and that would leave us without a fourth."

"Won't you and Mrs. Smith come down anyway?" she said. "Just to visit?"

"Who is it? This is Mr. Smith, S-m-i-t-h, your neighbor, and I wanted to let you know—"

"Yes," she said brightly, clearly. "I heard you, Mr. Smith. I thought that perhaps you and Mrs. Smith would like to come down anyway, just to talk. Perhaps you and she would like to have me show you my little card trick."

"You are going to a show at the Garrick?"

"No!" she said clearly, distinctly, taking a quiet breath. "I thought that perhaps you two would like to come down to my apartment and keep me company. Come down here. I am all alone tonight."

"Yes, some other night."

Oh, the deaf old man, with the buzzer at his ear! Why did people like that always insist on trying to use the phone, just to show how good they were?

"Please!" she almost screamed it, with a kind of desperation clutching at her heart. "Please, won't you come down? Tom is going to be away at a poker game, and probably all night, and it's so quiet, and the clock ticks so! Oh, I know that you can't hear what I am saying! But please let me talk to Mrs. Smith!"

"Yes. A sudden attack of the jaundice. Her sister called her up, and Mrs. Smith has gone to the drugstore to get some liver pills to take her. I didn't realize you had heard about it. Thank you for your sympathy. Some other night."

He hung up.

She pressed down the phone rocker. She dialed Tom's office number. But his phone didn't answer. She listened to it ringing a long time. He must have already left, on his way to his poker game. She put it down again, and left the bedroom. In the living room she paced up and down.

She went to the divan where she had left the half-opened package from Wambleys. They had done it all up compactly and neatly, the purchases she had made in the store, and those which she had left with the sales girl for delivery. She had taken out only the cards, which had been near the top.

She took out the Florentine leather desk set now, and unwrapped it. It would look very handsome on Tom's desk. Her box of writing paper, too. She took out a small, flat, gray-striped dime-store envelope. That was some dishcloths she had bought. Another envelope, a little lumpy. That was a pair of small gay blue china horses which she had got for the top of the bookcase. They had cost only ten cents each, but they were of a lovely periwinkle blue, and they would look handsome beside her copper bowl.

There was one more gray-striped dime-store package. She didn't remember that.

She looked at it. No, she couldn't remember it. She took it out from its nest in the corrugated board and torn wrapping paper, and turned it over in her hand a moment.

The white box came sliding out of the envelope. It was labeled *Wittelheimer's, Jewelers*. It had a hinged cover. She opened it. Opened it on that blaze of pale pink diamonds, lying in their cotton wool.

The fifty-two Golconda stones, as bright as white-hot fire.

THEY WERE bewildering to her. Sparkling in the light. Seeming to wink and breathe as they lay there. How they blazed! For a moment she didn't connect them in the slightest with the bang of guns, the scream and shouts, the stampeding people, the quiet shadow which had brushed behind her so obscurely in that moment when she had been standing at the stationery counter in Wambleys, midway in the store. She stared at them. They looked beautiful.

The doorbell rang. She set them down on the divan, half covering them under a fold of the torn wrapping paper. Still in a daze, she went to answer the bell.

There was the quiet gray man standing there. He had come in across the threshold before she could say a thing. Had closed the door quietly behind him.

She knew who he was, of course. In that instant. The smooth face, looking smoother because of the gray hair. The smooth tight mouth which had only a little twitch, at moments, in one corner. The pale, quiet eyes. She had seen him. In that moment as the sales girl ducked and

screamed, and she had half turned around. But she had not noticed him. The big dark man with the two guns, thudding and snarling down the aisle amidst the stamped-ing people, had been the one whom she had been looking at.

She didn't know just how she knew him. But she knew.

"From Wambleys," he said in his quiet flat voice. "I am a package inspector. Checking over, we find we may have included an item too many in a package which was sent out to you. Has it been delivered?"

She opened her mouth. If she had not looked at it! But perhaps it would have made no difference.

"Won't—" she tried to say, "won't you sit down? I—will look around. I think perhaps a package may have come. If you will just wait a moment. I was just sitting here doing some card tricks. Perhaps you would like to have me show you one."

If she could only divert his attention, keep him waiting, till she reached the phone! Tom had given her the place to call him up. Or if he had not arrived there yet, or if there was no time for that, still she could dial operator, ask for help to be sent, phoning from behind her closed bedroom door.

"Please," she said, "please be seated just a moment, and I—"

But he had read it in her eyes.

"Don't scream," he said in his flat quiet voice. "It will do no good to scream. Quiet! Quiet is the way to do it. Don't scream. I'm not going to hurt you. I know how it is, you want to run and scream. But it does no good. Quiet is the way to do it. Then nobody knows about it. I'm not going to hurt you. Just don't scream."

"I won't scream," she said childishly. "You won't hurt me, please?"

"Where are they?"

She pointed to the divan, where beneath the ragged edge of the torn paper, half exposed, the pink stones lay in their cotton wool.

He went to them and picked them up in his left hand, with his right still thrust deep in his pocket. He gave the box a gentle shake and looked them over, and closed it with a snap and stuck it in his pocket. He moved toward her quietly.

"You aren't going to hurt me?" she said breathlessly.

A shadow passed over his eyes. A red shadow. The same look which she had seen from the bus in front of Wambleys, when he had been coming out of the store entrance, quiet and inconspicuous.

"No," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. Nobody is going to even know it. Quiet. That is the way to do it. Then they aren't after you."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I am just going to tie you up, sister. Just tie you up. I used to be a bundle wrapper myself, and you're a nice little bundle. Just tie you up, and put a gag in that pretty little kisser of yours, so maybe you won't get too excited after I step out the door. You see, I brought the cord to wrap you up. That's all."

He had brought his hand out of his pocket.

"You won't hurt me, please?" she said childishly.

"Not a mark," he said, with that red ironical glance. "Nobody will ever know."

## CHAPTER VI

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN . . .

HE PUT A handkerchief around her wrists, and wrapped the cord swiftly and expertly. She sat down, staring at him with her wide open eyes. A killer—murderous and bloody and without remorse. It must have been he who had struck down that poor girl with a gun-butt in the elevator of the Oldfield Building this afternoon, and cracked her skull, so that they did not know whether she would live or die.

If she screamed now, or tried to, he would do that to her. Or worse. But he could also be gentle. He had promised that he would not hurt her.

See how gentle he was, in his swift expert cording of her knees and ankles, with his smooth, long, quick fingers. Putting handkerchiefs around her first, and then the cords, tight and unyielding enough to bind her helpless, but not hurting. It was only natural that he could not trust her, that he must tie her, and gag her afterwards. He had his life, his terrible life, at stake. He had the red diamonds

that he had killed and killed for. But he was gentle, in his own way. Almost a gentleman. He had promised that he would not hurt her if she did not scream, and he was taking care to keep his word good. A murderer. With round eyes, breathing quietly, she watched his pale dead eyes, his quiet, tight, twitching mouth, as swiftly yet gently he bound her. But who was she to judge him? How did she know what had made him what he was? Perhaps something terrible had happened to him when he was young to make him bitter and warp him into what he was. Perhaps some injustice had been done to him by the guardians of society, by the police and courts, and he had been convicted and punished for some crime which he had never done.

Or perhaps he had suffered some great and terrible personal tragedy, perhaps his whole family had been burned up in a fire before his eyes, or some girl whom he had loved had died in a tragic way—something that had exhausted all his emotions and his human feelings, and left him what he was.

Her father, her sweet and saintly old father, a little strait-laced in his rules of living, but so simple, kind, and good, had often told her that there was good in every man, that even the worst of them have noble instincts, that even a mad dog, when kindly treated, will stop its snarling and its foaming and its frenzied biting and will lick the hand which offers it sympathy and help.

Look at him, the terrible gray murderer. He had said that he wasn't going to hurt her, and he had been so gentle that he wouldn't even leave a mark upon her skin.

"Well, I guess that about does it, sister," he said quietly. "That about finishes it, all but tying your hands and feet together and jamming the gag in your pretty little kisser. Maybe I might grab a kiss off it first, too."

"I'll not let you do that!" she said.

"All right." He laughed at her quietly. "You don't need to try and scream. I just thought it might be a treat. I like them myself where there's something you can't quite read, and you're nothing but a nursery book. You're sitting there thinking in your little innocent sparrow brain how you are going to put the finger on me, aren't you? But you won't. No one is going to be following me. Nobody will ever know."

"I'll have to tell what happened, of course," she said bravely, "and describe you as best I can."

The ironical look passed over his eyes as he surveyed her. He didn't seem much interested in what identification she might make. "Well, fry me for a toad," he said. "I almost forgot the nifty detail. How are those wrists of yours, sister—comfortable? I guess you can still write."

HE PUSHED the bridge table in front of her, over her bound knees. He took a handkerchief in his hand, and picked up the box of writing paper which had come from Wambleys. "Take a sheet," he said. "I almost forgot the receipt."

With a fingertip he pushed the pencil on the table toward her bound hands.

She didn't understand him. "The receipt?" she said. "Sure," he said, with twitching humor. "I'm a package inspector from Wambleys, ain't I? And Wambleys delivered those rocks to you, and I ought to have a receipt." She heard the ticking of the clock, and his eyes smiled on her queerly.

He was a little mad, of course. But it was better to try to humor him. He had said that he would not hurt her, but she was not so sure. If she crossed him or opposed him . . . That murderous anger lurking just beneath, that fury which had struck down the girl in the elevator of the Oldfield Building. . . She looked at him with her innocent and childish eyes, and still she didn't know what kind of man he was. She didn't know, and she would never know, what it was all about.

He had bound her wrists very tightly together. And afterward, she understood, he was going to fasten them to her knees, so that she could not move any more. But as yet her hands were still free enough to pick up the pencil which he had pushed within her reach. No receipt that she could write would implicate her in the theft of the stones, or to exculpate him in any way from his murders. Perhaps it was a joke of his, his red ironic laughter. But it seemed to her really quite pointless and insane.

"What kind of a receipt do you want?" she said, a little breathless, humoring him.

"Like I say," he told her. "Write, 'To whom it may concern—' "

"To whom it may concern," she wrote, moving her two hands slowly.

" 'I was alone tonight—' "

"I was alone tonight," she wrote.

" 'And feeling kinda blue—' "

"And feeling kind of blue," she wrote.

" 'And no one else—' "

"And no one else," she wrote, hearing the ticking of the clock.

" 'Is responsible for this but me, and may God rest my soul.' "

"Is responsible for this but me—" she wrote.

She looked up at him, with the terror dawning in her eyes. She, who had been taught that even the mad dog is not entirely vile.

"But this is not a receipt!" she said.

He had the gag at her mouth, and he jammed it in as she opened it to scream. He pushed it back into her mouth, her throat, with force. She was half suffocated already. She tried to beat at him with her bound fists, falling backward in her chair, but he caught her wrists and held them, and caught her chair before it had quite fallen, before she could get a bruise.

He had not hurt her, no. Not a mark.

SHE LAY ON the floor, half strangled, staring at him with her horrified eyes, in the ultimate horror of her life. Quietly and swiftly, with those deft swift hands, he ran a cord from her wrists to her knees, binding them together. There was no movement she could make, no cry, and her breath was hard to get.

Still her consciousness must have been aware of the horror of it, to be still alive within the net, while that swift spider, gray as death, turned and wound her, round and round. To be alive and know, and hear the clock tick and tick, until her senses suffocated, and till she died.

He slid her trussed body into the little kitchenette, upon the cool waxed linoleum in the half darkness.

"Too bad, sister," he said in his flat quiet voice. "You'd put the finger on me if I didn't, and it's better to do it quiet. I'd have used chloroform or ether, but they're hard to get, and the docs are too damned wise. You just drift off to dreams. It won't be more than an hour at most. It



doesn't hurt at all, they say. I said I wouldn't hurt you. You see, you hardly smell it."

Then he went ahead with what he had planned to do, saying no more because there was nothing more necessary to say. And of course Mrs. Blodgett was very quiet, too; she could neither move nor speak.

She must have been aware, in that ultimate horror of her life, with her half strangled senses, of the soft opening of the oven door of the little gas range in the kitchen, and the quiet turning on of the jets. Only that, and his quiet footfalls departing, and the soft closing of the kitchenette door. But for a little while, lying there, she would still hear through the closed door the ticking of the clock.

Sometime during the night, when the game was going good and the liquor was spilling free, and big Tom Blodgett was red of face and winning and feeling high, the quiet gray man thought that he would cop a sneak between the deals, and speed back and air out the little kitchenette a few minutes, and take off the ropes and gags and the clean white handkerchiefs which kept the rope marks from showing, and leave her lying peaceful there on the floor, after he had turned on the jets again. And even if she hadn't signed the note, there was enough of it in her writing to make it all look good. Even better and quieter than old Charlie Ross from Texas, lying stripped and dead in a ravine beside the Monongahela. He had closed the kitchenette door quietly behind him. An hour, at the most, in that small room, and it was now a quarter of nine by the ticking clock on the mantel. He moved softly through the living room, the quiet gray man, with his hands in his pockets, with the red diamonds in there. On his way past the bridge table he looked down with an ironic eye at the decks of cards scattered on it. She had been going to show him a card trick, had she? Show him, whom they called Tricks. A dame like that, so dumb she didn't even know she was alive, and would hardly know the difference when she wasn't.

He must hurry now. Blodgett and Tug Corny and whoever else they had been able to take up for the game might be at the hotel already, asking for him; and it might look funny if he didn't show up right away.

He hadn't been thinking too much about the game. He had just asked Blodgett to a game to have an excuse for

calling the guy up, when he needed that buildup to get out of the trap they had him in. But then he had seen it as a way to kill two birds with one stone. Because when Blodgett came home red-eyed and happy from the game to find his love bird gone the gas route, it would just about kill him. Big smart guys like that go strong for these little dumb women, and it just eats them up. So much for Blodgett.

He remembered that he had even forgotten to get cards for the game. All that he had in his room were mackerels and strippers, and he would be a dope to try to ring them in on Blodgett. It might take him five or ten minutes to find a cigar store or a drugstore where they sold cards. The decks lying on the bridge table here were new. They must have just come in the package from Wambleys. He picked up one of the packs from the table as he passed by, and put it in his pocket.

## CHAPTER VII

### GET HIM ICE

BIG TOM BLODGETT reached for the deck of cards on the table, broke the seal with his thumbnail, and tore off the glassine wrapper. With swift expert hands he ripped off the joker and rules cards, gave the deck a snap and shuffle, and with a flip of his big paw sent the cards sprawling out face down across the board.

"Cut for deal," he said. "Pick up a card and call it." He took a drink of his highball, smiling at everybody, with his elbows planted. He loved this moment when he sat down relaxed and carefree at the game, in his shirtsleeves, with a glass beside him, and a gang of good fellows. Downtown all day and often late at night he was the hard-driving young D.A., and he had to watch himself and be on his guard against a hundred different brands of chiseling.

But with the gang this way, he could take down his hair and relax and be himself and breathe naturally. Old Tug Corny, who had been his college roommate. Many a time in college before exams he and Tug and the English prof and their faculty adviser had sat up all night boning over

seven-card Pete and spit-in-the-ocean together. Tug always claimed that his A.B. degree stood for Aces Backed. And old Bob Martin, whose old man owned seven banks, he was a great old bum. And Charlie Ross, Tug's oil man friend from Texas, he was a good guy, too. He was a quiet guy, and he was all right.

That was all that they had been able to assemble on such short notice. But four fellows can have a lot of fun together, if they are all good players, running rusty ones on each other, hooking each other back and forth, telling stories, kidding along, and with enough liquor to drink. Old Charlie had a lot of good liquor he had brought with him in his big Cadillac clean from Texas. The colored boy had just come up with the soda, ginger ale, and ice when Tom Blodgett came bursting in on the stroke of nine; and Tom Blodgett had taken off his coat and vest and hurled them on the bed, and snapped his suspenders on his chest and loosed his collar, and had poured himself a drink and sat down to play.

The others had all only just got there. They hadn't even sat down yet. Old Charlie had just laid a pack of cards on the table—and Tug Corny hollers at the colored boy, "Get him ice!" And the colored boy sort of shivers and goes chocolate-brown around the gills. And Charlie Ross, gray quiet old Charlie, he says, "He's gone screwball!" quick, and just like that.

Charlie, he must be a lot older than he looks, because he's got a daughter twenty-one out in Texas, and that's as old as toots herself is, so he's old enough to be toots' father, although he doesn't look it. But quiet or not, he's always there with the latest gag.

"Get him ice!" says Tug. And, "He's gone screwball!" Charlie says, quick like that, and never cracks a muscle of his face. A new gag they're spreading about the holdup. A terrible tough business, but you've got to laugh at something. It doesn't help the killer if you don't.

"YEOWHOW!" said Tom Blodgett, snapping his suspenders on his chest and stretching forth his legs beneath the table. "I'm a two-gun man from the wild and woolly! Get him Ace! He's got Screwball! How's that for a wild wolf howl?"

"Pretty good," said Charlie.

"Well, pick up a card, and cut for deal, you cutthroats. Let's play cards."

"Two of diamonds," said Tug Corny, picking up a card and laying it down again.

"Diamond four," said Bob Martin, drawing for the deal.

"King," said Charlie Ross, on Tom Blodgett's right. "Diamond."

"Ace of Diamonds," said big Tom Blodgett, slapping down the card he'd drawn. "All pink, anyway. But it looks as if I win the deal."

"Maybe it's the Diamond Deck," said Bob Martin with a laugh. "You've heard the gag that's going around, have you? You go into a cigar store, or any place else where they sell playing cards, and you say to the guy at the counter—"

Big Tom Blodgett smiled dutifully, picking up the cards and giving them three rapid cuts and shuffles. He laid the pack down in front of Charlie Ross for the cut, and Charlie tapped them. He began to drift them out around across the board, with fleeting motions.

"And then what does the guy say?" said Tug Corny. "He doesn't say anything," said Bob Martin. "He hasn't got the Diamond Deck."

Tom Blodgett laughed with the rest of them, though the fact was that he had drawn a blank in the middle of the story. He had been thinking of Pauline, his toots, as he dealt the cards swiftly and expertly around, he didn't know just why. Her loving affectionate little ways, her silly little brain. He really ought to have gone home tonight and done his duty by playing bridge with the deaf old Smiths. Only a guy got tired, hard-driving at the office, with all the crooks he had to deal with and the hardness and ugliness of life, and he deserved some relaxation.

Maybe he would lay off early tonight, though, instead of letting it drag out into an all-night session, and get home at midnight or one o'clock. She would be asleep long ago by that time, of course. But she would be glad to know that he hadn't stayed out quite all night tonight, if she should wake up.

"What are we playing, jackpots?" he said good-humoredly. "Dealer opens with a bang and the small sum of one buck. This gag about the Diamond Deck reminds me of this wife of mine. This dumb little wife of mine. She barely knows one card from another, but she thinks she has a card trick she's invented for herself.

"She takes four decks of cards, and she puts the same suit of the different packs together, making four new packs, all spades, hearts, and so on, and then she lays them out before the others at the bridge table and asks them to cut and shuffle the deck in front of them, and if they pick out a card she will name the suit of it for them. And when they do, she does."

"I don't get it," said Tug Corny. "I'll stay for a buck."

"Staying for a buck myself," said Bob Martin. "Where's the trick of it?"

"Might as well stay for a buck myself, if that's all it's costing," said quiet gray Charlie, riffing through his cards meagerly. "You mean she stacks the decks and expects to fool anybody? It sounds pretty dumb."

"YOU DON'T KNOW my wife," said big Tom Blodgett, laughing. "She can think of even dumber. But that's not all, because even after stacking her four one-suiter decks she's liable to get mixed up on them, or forget them, so she marks the backs of each card with a light pencil initial showing its suit. She was a minister's daughter, and she's so guileless, that's the whole damned joke of it, that she actually thinks she's invented stacking decks and marking cards."

They laughed with him as he roared. "How many cards?" he said.

"Content with what you gave me," said Tug.

"Think I'll play these, myself," said Bob Martin mildly.

"Enough," said quiet gray Charlie Ross, looking with his pale quiet eyes around him.

"Well, something's hot and about to fry," said big Tom Blodgett happily, laying down the remainder of the deck and spitting on his hands. "To be fried for a toad, as Charlie says. Dealer also standing pat, just to make it even. A flock of pat hands all around the board, unless about three of you are lying. And just to keep you honest, dealer opened and is now betting seven bucks."

"Raise one," said Tug mildly.

"And nine," said Bob Martin, shoving them in.

"See," said quiet gray Charlie Ross, with his pale gray eyes around him, riffling the edges of his cards and holding them tight together.

"One and nine makes twenty-three to me," said big Tom Blodgett, "if I hike it just thirteen more. Somebody's lying like the hinges, and it might as well be me. But maybe I'm not kidding you when I say I've got 'em."

"And one more," said Tug Corny, putting them in.

"I'm only seeing," said Bob Martin, pulling in his horns.

"A hundred more," said Charlie Ross, definitely.

"Ouch!" said Tom Blodgett, not unhappily. "A big wham lying waiting. I thought somebody was lying low to make a hook when everybody came in for a buck with pat hands. Did some guy pull a full house pat to beat my poor feeble little straight? A straight is what it is, and I'm not lying. Well, fun is fun but money's money, and I'll not make it high. I'll do more than see that hundred, Charlie."

"Straight's no good," Tug Corny said. "I guess I'll have to see it, too."

"Same goes for me," Bob Martin said. "What are they, Charlie?"

"Flush," said quiet gray Charlie Ross.

"Same here," said Tug Corny. "Diamonds."

"Well, I'll be damned," Bob Martin said. "I've got a diamond flush, too. But mine's ace high. What suit is your flush, Charlie?"

The quiet gray man laid down his cards in front of him. He wet his lips. "Wins," he said. "I was just kidding all of you. I had a rusty one. Just nothing."

Tom Blodgett was breathing quietly.

"Diamond flush, ace high, win from you, Tom?" said Bob Martin, reaching for the chips.

"I've got a straight flush, Bob, that's all," Tom Blodgett said, breathing quietly. "A small one, but pretty good. Ace to five of diamonds."

"But that couldn't be. I've got the ace of diamonds myself," said Bob Martin.

He was a little slow.

"And there couldn't be fifteen diamonds, either," said big Tom Blodgett quietly, "to make three diamond flushes. But there are. Everyone has diamonds except

Charlie."

The small quiet gray man had his thin long hand upon the cards that he had laid down on the table. He had it planted. Big Tom Blodgett reached over, and took up the thin hand, as he might remove a clinging starfish from a stone, while Charlie Ross's mouth twitched painfully.

"Royal straight flush of diamonds, ten to ace," said Big Tom Blodgett softly. "And you laid them down, Charlie. What is the gag? Why did you lay them down, Charlie, when you found there were too many diamonds?"

The quiet gray man had slid his chair back a little. He was getting up from it. Tom Blodgett picked up the remainder of the undealt deck, and turned it over and flung the cards out across the table.

"Fifty-two," he said. "All diamonds. Pink."

The small quiet gray man was reaching for his coat. Tom Blodgett turned a card over, and saw the faint penciled D upon its back, amidst the scrolls. All of them, they had that faint D. So obvious and dumb and silly, like his toots.

Big Tom Blodgett was on his feet, too. "What were you doing in my house?" he said. "Where did you get those diamonds? Just stop. Just stop. Just answer me quick. Just answer me with a smart one. Just stop your damned twitching mouth, Charlie Ross from Texas, and think. Ah, you—"

The quiet gray man had tried to reach the door, but big Tom Blodgett, moving on his feet with speed and fury, was there and blocking it. The quiet gray man had his sap out of his pocket, and there was a bubbling on his lips and a bubbling in his throat.

"Out! Out!" he snarled. "Out of my way, before I slam you!"

He howled and swung his sap as big Tom Blodgett went at him. He bowled like a bloodthirsty wolf, or a coyote crazed with terror. But Tom Blodgett had his hands upon him then, and Tom Blodgett had him slammed against the wall. He screamed, and Tom Blodgett's fist banged him beneath the ear, sending his head back; and his jaw went limp. Tom Blodgett's fist struck him again, before he could fall down, knocking a hole in the plaster loose where his head hit it, and he went down like water.

"Get him ice!" screamed Tug Corny crazily, with the ice pitcher he had snatched up. "He's gone screwball!"

And Tug really meant it, he really thought it, about big Tom Blodgett. He hadn't been quite so quick to understand that deck of diamonds. He hadn't quite Tom Blodgett's keen card sense. But the white box spilled out of the quiet gray man's coat pocket as he slid and sprawled there on the floor against the wall, and the great pink Golconda stones came spilling out of it, the other Deck of Diamonds.

He would be lying there with his broken jaw until they came and got him. And they would fry him for a toad. . . .

IF SHE HAD only told him! If she had only told him that she had been downtown today, in Wambleys-Fifth Avenue, when the killers had come rushing in, seeking their desperate escape. If she had only told him just how she had been ordering a charge and asking for some other packages to be delivered in that moment as the killer who had the diamonds had gone brushing frantically by, seeing his escape cut off at every door, seeking a way to get rid of the jewels and yet hold on to them. If she had only told him that she had been there, his innocent, loving, unsuspecting, brown-haired Pauline.

Or if only he had watched over her a little better.

She had been in the little kitchenette a half hour, perhaps, when he had come in and smashed the windows out, and got her to the draft of cold autumnal air, pulling off the suffocating gag and cutting those bonds about her. The ambulance men and the utilities emergency crew, who were there within five minutes, brought oxygen with them, but she didn't need it. She was in her white bed in the hospital now, and she was all right.

"Tom," she said to him.

"Yes, toots?"

"I've thought of a way to make that trick of mine even better, though it would be very expensive. If I bought fifty-two decks of cards, and took out one particular card from each deck—for instance the queen of hearts—and put them all together, then I could call the card, too, couldn't I? Of course it would be a shame to waste all the other cards, but would they have to be wasted? Perhaps



*Joel Townsley Rogers*

you could use them in some other games without the silly little queen."

"I don't want to play any games without my silly little queen," said big Tom Blodgett. "You're all right, toots."

THE END

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